

Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools

NCSE POLICY ADVICE PAPER NO. 4



Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools

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An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

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Foreword

The NCSE has a vision of a society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them achieve their potential. We are very pleased therefore to respond to the Minister's request for advice on how students with special educational needs should, in the future, be supported in schools.

The timing of this request was particularly apt given that it is now twenty years since the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) published its landmark report on educational provision for children with special educational needs. The influence of this report on the development of State policy over subsequent years is widely acknowledged. There has been significantly increased State investment in the development of educational services and considerable progress made in the inclusion of students with special educational needs in schools since 1993. We particularly welcome that the current NCSE strategic review has taken place under the chairmanship of Sydney Blain, who was a member of this committee.

We place great importance on our responsibility to provide the Minister with expert, independent, evidence-informed policy advice on special education. We are particularly conscious of the far-reaching consequences this advice could have for the provision of educational services to future generations of Irish children with special educational needs. We took great care to consult widely in the preparation of this advice and to listen to what parents, students, teachers and other stakeholders were telling us about what worked well in the system and what needed to be changed. Our advice is also informed by current national and international research to ensure a firm evidence basis for our proposals.

We are aware that any proposal to change the current system has the potential to evoke considerable anxiety among schools and parents who may fear that any change could adversely impact their child or school. We would like to emphasise that our proposals were developed to serve the interests of students with special educational needs rather than those of the system. If the Minister accepts our proposals, we also stress the importance of devoting sufficient time to consultation with stakeholders in the development and refinement of a new model.

We believe that the EPSEN Act, 2004 continues to offer the most effective route to assessment and educational planning for children with special educational needs and we have called on the Minister to implement the Act in full, as soon as resources become available. Pending its full commencement, we consider our proposals, if implemented, are in keeping with the Act's principles and intent and are intended to ensure the best use of available resources.

I would like to thank all those who contributed to this policy advice in any way and particularly those who took part in our consultation meetings. We hope that our advice is of assistance to the Minister in developing further policy in this area.

Teresa Griffin
May 2013

Message from Sydney Blain

Many people made a substantial contribution to the development and refinement of this important policy advice paper during 2012. Its proposals were informed by a wide-ranging consultative process which included parents, SNAs, students, teachers, principals, NEPS, SENOs, HSE professionals, school management bodies, voluntary bodies and advocacy groups. The NCSE also sought advice from our Consultative Forum whose membership comprises representatives of the education stakeholders. All of these discussions shaped and guided our work as we formulated final proposals for submission to the Minister.

I would particularly like to acknowledge the tireless commitment of my fellow Council members who devoted many hours to discussing and debating the important issues involved. I am particularly appreciative that all of these discussions were conducted in an atmosphere characterised by a mutual respect of different view-points and a constructive determination to complete the task within a reasonable time-frame. I would also like to thank the NCSE executive for their work in undertaking the consultation process and in drawing together the views of Council members in this final paper.

It is hard to believe that twenty years have gone by since the report of the SERC committee was published. As a member of that committee, I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to be part of this current NCSE strategic review. I believe that our proposals, if implemented, have the potential to bring about significant improvements in the education of children with special educational needs in our schools over the coming years.

Sydney Blain
Chairperson NCSE
2006-2012

Abbreviations

ABA	Applied behaviour analysis
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ASD	Autistic spectrum disorders
AT	Assistive technology
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CPD	Continuing professional development
DARE	Disability access route to education
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Educational Opportunity in Schools
DoH	Department of Health
EADSNE	European Agency of Development in Special Needs Education
EBD	Emotional disturbance/behavioural disorder
ECCE	Early childhood care and education
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GAM	General allocation model
GLD	General learning disability
HSE	Health Service Executive
HSCL	Home school community liaison
ICT	Information and communications technology
IEP	Individual education plan
IPLP	Individual profile and learning programme
ISL	Irish sign language
ITE	Initial teacher education
LS/R	Learning support/resource (teacher)
NABMSE	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
NBSS	National Behaviour Support Service
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NEWB	National Educational Welfare Board
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, England, UK
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
RACE	Reasonable accommodation in certificate examinations
RTH	Resource teaching hours
SENO	Special educational needs organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SESS	Special Education Support Service
Severe EBD	Severe emotional disturbance/behaviour disorder
SNA	Special needs assistant
TES	Teacher education section
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VFM	Value for money
WHO	World Health Organisation

Executive Summary



Executive Summary

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) supports an inclusive education system that enables children and adults with special educational needs to achieve their potential. One of our key functions is to provide the Minister for Education and Skills with expert, independent, evidence-informed policy advice on special education for children and adults. In 2012, we were requested to provide policy advice on how students with special educational needs should, in the future, be supported in schools.

Our advice is informed by the following six principles:

- Principle 1: All children, irrespective of special educational need, are welcome and able to enrol in their local schools.¹
- Principle 2: All educational supports are allocated equitably to schools in line with the educational needs of students.
- Principle 3: All students with special educational needs have access to available educational supports in line with their needs.
- Principle 4: Students with special educational needs have an individualised assessment which informs teaching and learning and forms one part of an ongoing and cyclical process of assessment, intervention and review of outcomes.
- Principle 5: Available resources are used to maximum effect to drive improved outcomes for children; State services work together to achieve this.
- Principle 6: Parents' role as the natural and primary educators of the child is respected.

The advice was prepared following a widespread process of consultation with the education partners as well as a review of relevant national and international research findings to ensure that a comprehensive approach to developing the policy advice was adopted.

In developing this policy advice, we were conscious that meeting students' identified educational needs was the paramount consideration which must be kept at the centre of proposals and recommendations. It is our view that the most effective route to the assessment and planning for students with special educational needs lies in the full implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004) which provides a blueprint for supporting and educating these students.

We therefore recommend that the EPSEN Act is fully implemented as soon as resources permit.

We realise that the current fiscal position means the Government has no access to the resources required to enable a full implementation of EPSEN in the short to medium term. Accordingly, our policy advice has been developed in keeping with the spirit and aspira-

¹ The NCSE considers that this is an important principle, while recognising that some children with complex needs may require a more supportive special school or special class placement.

tions of EPSEN, and is intended to move the educational system towards the Act's principles and intent, pending its full implementation.

The State's annual expenditure on special education increased from €468 million in 2004 to €1.3 billion in 2011, representing a percentage increase of 178 per cent at a time when the State's total income from tax returns fell by €1.5 billion (€35.7 billion in 2004 to €34.2 billion in 2011). This significant investment in providing supports for students with special educational over the last decade has transformed the ability of schools to educate them.

It is important to acknowledge schools' contribution to the inclusion of students with special educational needs during this period. Groups consulted also viewed the establishment of the NCSE and the local role of the special educational needs organiser (SENO) as positive developments.

There was general agreement that many students with special educational needs are thriving and making significant progress in school. There was agreement that the supports already in place in schools are those which continue to be required so that students with special educational needs are enabled to participate in, and benefit from, education and generally to fulfil their potential. These supports include:

- Approximately 10,000 learning support and resource teachers up from approximately 1,300 in 1993;
- 630-plus special classes up from 390 in 1993 (1993 figure includes special classes for children from the Travelling community whereas the current figure refers only to special classes for children with special educational needs arising from a disability);
- 10,000-plus special needs assistants (SNAs) up from fewer than 100 in 1993;
- Additional funding provided to special schools and mainstream schools with special classes;
- National Educational Psychological Service;
- Specialist training for teachers in special education;
- Assistive technology;
- School building adaptations;
- Specialist equipment;
- School transport (the average cost of providing school transport is €1,020 at primary level, €958 at post-primary level and €9,087 for students with special needs). The overall annual transport scheme costs €169 million and it is estimated that about 34 per cent of the budget (€58 million) is spent on special needs transport supporting 8,000 children (DES, Transport Section).

However, despite all the positive aspects, there is still room for improvement. The most fundamental need of all is that a child can be enrolled in a school. While most schools do welcome and enrol children with special educational needs, the NCSE is disappointed that some schools erect overt and/or 'soft' barriers to prevent or discourage parents from enrolling their children in these schools.

We consider that schools are funded and resourced to provide an educational service to all children in their locality. Exclusionary practices cannot be permitted in any national system of education.

The NCSE strongly recommends that the DES introduce a robust regulatory enrolment framework for schools to ensure that:

- **Every child with special educational needs is protected from enrolment practices or policies with overt or covert barriers that block his/her access to enrolment in the school.**
- **Every child with special educational needs may enrol in the nearest school that is or can be resourced by the NCSE to meet his/her needs.**
- **A school must enrol a student with special educational needs if so directed by the SENO on the basis that the school will be provided with resources in line with national policy.**
- **A school must establish a special class if so requested by a SENO.**

There are advantages in the current approach to the identification and assessment of special educational needs and the provision of additional supports. Schools and parents particularly value the link that currently exists between diagnosis of disability and sanctioning of additional resources for low incidence disability. In their view this provides a level of certainty that the required resources will be in place for individual students with special educational needs.

There are also significant difficulties with the current approach. Research studies consistently highlight the need for early and appropriate intervention to promote optimal educational outcomes. The current system of additional resource allocation for low incidence disabilities is dependent on a diagnosis of disability. It also allocates the same level of resources for every student within each disability category even though the supports required for one student could be significantly greater or lesser than another. NCSE-commissioned research studies suggest the diagnosis of disability should not be the prerequisite determinant for the allocation of additional resources for students with special educational needs. They should instead be based on an assessment of student needs.

The NCSE is greatly concerned that the lack of health services, alongside limited access to educational psychological assessments, means some children with special educational needs are unable to access the professional assessments on which resources for low incidence disabilities are based. We are also concerned that many assessments simply state a child's disability rather than informing and guiding a child's development, teaching and learning. The Health Service Executive (HSE) professionals consulted were particularly concerned at being pressurised to diagnose a child with a disability when the need for such a diagnosis was to obtain an educational service rather than indicated as required for health or social reasons. They considered their time and expertise would be more effectively used in providing clinical interventions and support as well as advising parents and schools on how best to support the child's development and learning.

The NCSE has concluded that the current support allocation model does not provide all children with equitable access to educational supports. It may reinforce advantage and confirm disadvantage – those who can, or whose school can, afford to pay for private

assessments can access additional supports immediately, where eligible; those who cannot are deprived of such supports until they can be assessed through the public system.

Concern was also expressed – in the consultation process and directly to the NCSE – that resources are not being allocated to greatest effect. The policy of linking allocation of learning support posts to number of class teachers in the school, may in general seem reasonable and fair. However, each school’s need for such support can vary significantly, irrespective of teacher numbers.

The NCSE considers that the model for allocating additional supports to schools should be changed because:

- Students with special educational needs do not have equitable access to formal assessments which means in turn that they do not have equitable access to teaching, care and other supports.
- The allocation of additional State educational resources should not depend on a parent’s ability to pay for professional assessments or the proximity to HSE supports.
- The level of additional supports provided should be in line with the needs of the child rather than being linked to a diagnosis of a particular category of disability.
- At a time of scarce resources, all teaching posts should be allocated in line with profiled educational need within a school rather than the number of class teachers or students within a school.

The NCSE believes:

A new model should be developed for the allocation of additional teaching resources to mainstream schools which is based on the profiled need of each school, without the need for a diagnosis of disability.

A new model

The NCSE strongly subscribes to the principle that all students with special educational needs should have individualised assessments which inform their teaching and learning programme. However, in this paper, the NCSE distinguishes between:

- Assessment undertaken to identify a student’s learning needs and inform intervention.
- Assessment undertaken purely for diagnosis to satisfy criteria for the allocation of resources. This approach may result in the unnecessary or premature labelling of children with a disability, and may not always be in a child’s best interest.

Student assessment to inform educational planning remains a core component of any good educational system. Much of this can be done at school level while some students will continue to need access to psychological and other health assessments but only where these are indicated as necessary to inform intervention. The revised model should focus on use of assessment to inform teaching and learning and deployment of additional

resources in accordance with a student's educational needs as identified through individualised planning processes.²

The NCSE considers that the basis on which learning support and resource teaching support is allocated for more prevalent categories of special educational need should change. Linking the allocation of additional supports to the number of class teachers, or a historic basis for such allocations, rather than the level of educational need in each school, does not ensure an optimum use of available resources. The allocation of all additional teaching supports to primary and post-primary schools (for both high and low incidence special educational needs) should be tailored to respond to the profiled need of each school. Teaching supports should be based on a suite of indicators of educational need, a number of which are proposed in the paper. Once additional supports are allocated to a school, responsibility for their deployment should lie with the school – this will enable students to receive support in line with goals and targets set out through their learning plan process rather than their category of disability. Linking the allocation of additional support to the individual learning plan process moves the system towards what is envisaged under EPSEN, which places considerable emphasis on the development of education plans.

The NCSE is confident that students with special educational needs will benefit from such a system through having more immediate access to appropriate levels of additional teaching resources in schools and support that specifically drives improved outcomes through the reporting of progress on goals and targets set out in the planning process.

It will take some time to refine the details of an effective new model of resource allocation: to test it, to put transition arrangements in place and to implement it. We are very aware that any proposal to change the current system has the potential to provoke considerable anxiety among schools and parents, who may fear any change will reduce resourcing levels available to support students with special educational needs. There is real fear that any recommendation for change will simply be a means of delivering savings to the Exchequer rather than as part of a process of incremental improvement in responding to need or a way of using scarce resources to best effect.

The NCSE strongly advises that sufficient time is allowed for the development of a new model and for adequate consultation to take place with the education stakeholders. This process is necessary to build confidence that the new system will be equitable, transparent and efficient in delivering resources to students with special educational needs. Schools, in particular, will need specific advice on how, without a professional diagnosis of disability, to allocate and use available resources to support students with special educational needs.

If the Minister were to agree in principle to the development of the alternative model proposed, the NCSE will then proceed to the next phase and establish a working group to develop it.

² In this paper, the terms 'individualised planning' and 'learning plan process' refer to all types of differentiated planning undertaken by the school for the student with special educational needs. This can include classroom/group level planning, individual profiles and learning programmes (IPLPs) (DES, 2000) and/or individual educational plans (IEPs) (NCSE, 2006). Use of the over-arching terms is intended to clarify that not all students with special educational needs require the detailed planning involved in the development of an IEP.

Pending implementation of new model

It is reasonable to expect that additional educational resources should drive improved educational outcomes for children with special educational needs. At present, there is no systematic attempt to measure or record such outcomes. An appropriate system should be put in place to monitor the efficient use of additional resources by schools and student outcomes in line with goals and targets set through learning plan processes.

We are concerned at the reports of inappropriate use, by some schools, of additional teaching supports as well as the lack of information on outcomes. Schools should be advised that SENOS will be empowered to withdraw supports in cases where they are being inappropriately used. To ensure external oversight of the use of additional teaching supports, each school should be required to provide an overall annual report to the NCSE detailing how they are being used to the benefit of students with special educational needs and the outcomes students achieve through the learning plan process.

The NCSE is concerned that any system should ensure that students with the greatest need receive proportionately the most supports. Several proposals were put forward for how this might be achieved. For example, there was significant agreement that some students' special educational needs could be met through the learning support service rather than by immediately triggering a psychological assessment leading to an additional allocation of resource teaching hours.

There are certain conditions where there can be a reasonable expectation that student functioning can improve through interventions provided as many students have special educational needs that respond well to intervention. The allocation process, however, does not provide for a periodic review of teaching resources allocated or adjustments to support levels provided to schools that might reflect this improved situation. There was genuine concern that at present the system has no mechanism to facilitate such an adjustment. This could result in supports being left in schools where they are no longer required relative to other schools.

On the other hand, some students experience sudden and unanticipated difficulties in their lives and could benefit from immediate access to support teachers – even for a short time. The current system permits no such access as it requires that a student either has a specific diagnosis of disability or that their level of educational attainment is low before they can access additional teaching resources.

Pending the development and implementation of a new model, there are a number of changes which the NCSE believes, if adopted, would strengthen and improve the operation and effectiveness of the system. These changes include the following:

- **Before additional teaching and care supports are sanctioned for students with special educational needs, schools should confirm that planning is in place for the students concerned, as part of the learning plan process. Once additional supports for students with special educational needs arising from both high and low incidence special educational needs are allocated to a school, their deployment should be linked to individualised planning processes in line with the NEPS continuum of provision.**
- **Schools should be required to provide annual reports to the NCSE on progress made and student outcomes achieved through the learning plan process.**
- **Students with acquired brain injury; mild hearing loss; developmental co-ordination disorder (including dyspraxia), and/or students who have emergency short-term needs following physical injuries sustained, for example, in a road traffic accident and those whose learning is affected by a family bereavement or by serious short-term emotional difficulties should have access to learning support teachers.**
- **The DES should restate and clarify the criteria for access to additional supports for students with physical disabilities and severe EBD to ensure that resources are directed at students with the greatest need within these categories.**
- **Conditions exist where student functioning can improve through intervention over time. These conditions include specific speech and language disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders and certain physical disabilities. The additional resources provided for these categories should therefore be provided on a time-bound basis for a period of three years and student progress should be annually reviewed by the school, and where necessary, with the NEPS psychologist.**
- **The DES should reiterate that additional teaching resources for students with learning support needs and high incidence disabilities can be allocated differentially in accordance with their learning needs (DES, 2005).**

Further recommendations

The NCSE was reassured that the existing pupil-teacher ratios (PTRs) for special schools and classes were generally considered to be adequate, except in one particular instance where children present with life-threatening medical conditions requiring ongoing medical intervention to ensure their survival. The NCSE therefore considers that existing ratios should continue to provide the basis for staff appointment to special schools and classes but recommends:

Special schools for severe/profound learning disabilities catering for students with chronic high dependency needs requiring ongoing medical intervention to survive, should be allowed to establish one class group on a PTR of 4:1 and the HSE should provide funding for access to a school nurse.

While a wide range of professionals work with children and young people with special educational needs, there is evidence that the quality of teachers and their teaching are factors most likely to have the greatest impact and influence on educational outcomes. The NCSE considers therefore that students with special educational needs, as with all other students, should be educated by fully qualified teachers, who are registered with the Teaching Council.

Given the centrality of the teacher in the education of students with special educational needs, the NCSE considers that special education should form a mandatory part of every teacher's initial training and on-going continuous professional development. The development of a student's organisational, social and communication skills should be viewed as part of every teacher's responsibilities and should form part of the whole-school plan.

The NCSE therefore recommends:

The Teaching Council and the DES should ensure that teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, understanding and competence to meet the diverse learning needs of students with special educational needs.

The Teaching Council should stipulate mandatory levels and frequency of CPD that teachers are required to undertake for teaching students with special educational needs within an overall framework of CPD for teachers.

Students with special educational needs require qualified teachers trained and equipped with the skills necessary to meet their educational and care needs. Some of these students require care support that may be significantly above what would normally be expected of a teacher in the classroom situation. In these cases, special needs assistant (SNA) support is sanctioned to enable schools to manage the care needs of these students.

SNAs play an important role in assisting schools to support students with significant care needs and have substantially assisted the process of including students with special educational needs in schools. The NCSE is aware of considerable discussion and commentary on the SNA scheme, much generated from a belief that these students benefit from para-educational support and by a desire to maintain it for as long as possible.

How support is provided in classrooms and the role of paraprofessionals in providing this support is much broader than providing appropriate support for students with special educational needs. Research findings indicate that paraprofessional support does not necessarily improve academic outcomes and may result in these students having less

teacher involvement in their learning; becoming overly dependent on such support and being socially isolated from other students (Giangreco & Doyle 2007, Blatchford et al, 2009).

Given international research evidence that paraprofessionals can act as a barrier to student access to the teacher and full participation in classroom activities, the NCSE considers there is insufficient evidence, at this point in time, to support the introduction of a new teaching assistant grade to work specifically with students with special educational needs. Instead, we believe their full educational needs should be met by each school having sufficient fully qualified teachers equipped with the necessary skills.

The NCSE was concerned that many parents and schools find it difficult to access health interventions for children who require them. Some children with certain special educational needs require access to health-funded clinical and therapeutic supports to assist their development and learning. The NCSE supports the roll-out of the HSE's current policy as outlined in the Progressing Disability Services for Children 0-18 (HSE, 2009), but strongly believes children and young people with special educational needs require immediate access to adequate health services, which cannot await this programme's full implementation. The NCSE therefore recommends that:

Children and young people with special educational needs should be recognised as a key health priority. Pending the full roll-out of the progressing disability services for children 0-18 programme, the HSE should develop a plan that provides adequate clinical and therapeutic supports for children and young people with special educational needs, irrespective of school placement.

The consultation process clearly highlighted duplication in the assessment process required to access a range of State services. The NCSE considers children with disabilities should not have to undergo several different professional assessments of their needs to gain access to these services, where one multi-disciplinary assessment would suffice. One national assessment should provide access to educational, health and welfare service entitlements. It should be sufficiently detailed to inform teaching and learning plans for the student concerned.

The NCSE therefore recommends that the relevant State Departments (health, education, children and social protection) and agencies should develop and implement one national system of assessment which can be used to access services across all areas.

Also included in this report (see chapter 4, section 4.4) is a series of further recommendations relating to schemes and services that support students with special educational needs including assistive technology, early intervention, the extended school year, capitation grants, the Visiting Teacher Service and the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS).

Finally, many post-primary aged students are now in special schools and are following a post-primary curriculum and taking National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), Level 3 courses (for example, FETAC level 3 and Junior Certificate). It is therefore no longer appropriate for all special schools to be designated as national schools and required to follow the Rules for National Schools.

The NCSE recommends that:

The DES should provide for the establishment of a new type of special school with rules and organisational structures appropriate to the profile and age of students with complex special educational needs enrolled.

1 Introduction



1 Introduction

1.1 Terms of reference

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) supports an inclusive education system that enables children and adults with special educational needs to achieve their potential. One of our key functions is to provide the Minister for Education and Skills with expert, independent, evidence-informed policy advice on special education for children and adults. In 2012, we were requested to provide policy advice on how students with special educational needs should, in the future, be supported in schools. The terms of reference for the policy advice are set out below:

- To advise the Minister for Education and Skills on the appropriate nature and configuration of educational supports which should be allocated to schools to provide students with special educational needs with the opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, education and generally to develop their potential to include the following specific areas:
- To review how the educational system currently places and supports students with special educational needs in schools.
- To review how students with special educational needs are identified and their needs assessed with a view to determining the educational supports required.
- The appropriate supports which should be allocated to schools to:
 - provide students with special educational needs with the opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, education and generally to develop his or her potential; and
 - drive and measure improved educational outcomes.
- The appropriate basis for allocating a quantum of supports to schools, taking into account the needs of students in the various school settings, the existing supports in place and the need for flexibility given constrained resources.
- The appropriate allocation model through which available supports would be provided efficiently.

1.2 State investment

It is now almost 20 years since the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) reported following its comprehensive review of the services that existed at that time (DES³, 1993). In the meantime, the State has invested significantly in supports allocated to students with special educational needs and there have been many legislative, attitudinal and administrative changes. These incorporate the inclusion of all children with disabilities in education, a greater focus on including children with special educational needs in main-

3 The Department of Education and Science was renamed as the Department of Education and Skills in May 2010

stream schools and significant increases in the teaching and care support provided in all settings to students with special educational needs. The considerable progress made by most schools and teachers in welcoming and managing the inclusion of students with special educational needs must also be acknowledged.

The budget for special education includes salary costs for additional teaching and SNA supports which amount to approximately €900m, with the other major areas of investment including the National Educational Psychological Service, teacher professional development, special school transport arrangements, assistive technology, enhanced capitation payments for special schools and special classes and programmes for adults with special educational needs. Table 1 below shows the expenditure from 2004-11 respectively on special education, with expenditure for 2012 also in the region of €1.3 bn.

Table 1: Expenditure on special education 2004-11

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
€468m	€605m	€706m	€838m	€900m	€1bn	€1.2bn	€1.3bn

Source: Written answer to Dáil question: 6th November, 2012 Reference: 47638/12

It is interesting to note that the State's net tax receipts were €35.7 billion for 2004, €47.5 billion for 2007 and €34.2 billion for 2011.⁴ Despite this reduction of €1.5 billion in net tax receipts between 2004 and 2011, annual expenditure on special education significantly increased from €468m to €1.3 billion (an increase of 178 per cent) during the same period demonstrating the State's continued commitment to maintaining and increasing investment in the area at a time when the country is experiencing a serious decline in its economic circumstances.

1.3 Continuum of provision

In Ireland, students with special educational needs are served by a continuum of provision ranging from full-time enrolment in mainstream classes to full-time enrolment in special schools, with a variety of options in between. This means a range of placement options is available to them which includes:

- A mainstream class, where the student with special educational needs receives additional attention from the class teacher through differentiation of the curriculum and/or additional teaching support provided by a resource/learning support teacher or through co-teaching, where required.
- A special class in a mainstream school.
- A special school which has been designated by the Department of Education and Skills for a particular category or categories of disability.

Special needs assistants (SNAs) are allocated to primary, post-primary and special schools to support students with a disability who also have significant care needs.

⁴ See annual reports for 2004, 2007 and 2011 on website of Revenue Commissioners at: <http://www.revenue.ie/en/about/publications/annual-reports.html>

The NCSE notes that even though there has been a significant investment in resources to support the inclusion of students in mainstream schools over the last decade, the numbers attending special schools and classes have remained relatively constant. Table 2 below show the numbers enrolled in special schools and classes over 2004-11.

Table 2: Numbers of students in special schools and classes as % of total school population

Students	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total school pop.	784,460	790,296	775,046	791,600	807,776	819,134	823,430	838,990
No in special schools	6,048	6,059	6,008	6,049	6,078	6,290	6,568	6,812
% of total	0.77	0.77	0.78	0.76	0.75	0.77	0.80	0.81
No in special classes	3,191	3,072	2,989	2,984	2,931	2,625	3,000	3,286
% of total	0.41	0.39	0.39	0.38	0.36	0.32	0.36	0.39

- Sources:**
1. Total school population and number of students in special schools is adapted from the National School Annual Census, Statistics Section, DES, 2004-11.
 2. Number of students in special classes 2004 to 2009 is adapted from the National School Annual Census, Statistics Section, DES.
 3. Number of students in special classes, 2010 to 2011 NCSE administrative system

The State has invested considerable resources in supporting its policy of including students with special educational needs in mainstream schools where undoubtedly they are now better supported. It is interesting to note, however, that throughout this investment, no significant move away from students attending special schools to attending local mainstream schools is evident. Also of concern is a developing trend of students transferring to special schools as they approach the age to transfer to post-primary schools. A study conducted on behalf of the National Association for Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE, 2012) showed that in 2008-09 the total number of students in special schools comprised 60 per cent (3,912) of students aged over 12 and 40 per cent (2,714) of students aged under 12. In 2008-09 alone, 532 students enrolled in special schools from mainstream primary, of which 171 (31 per cent) enrolled from sixth class. It is timely therefore to review how well the system supports students with special educational needs and the support services required to facilitate their transition from primary to post-primary school.

In developing its policy advice, the NCSE strongly believes that the needs of students with special educational needs should be at the centre of its proposals and recommendations. The policy advice should serve the needs of these students rather than those of the system. The NCSE is conscious that any proposal to change the resource allocation model could provoke considerable fear that this would reduce supports to students with special educational needs. There is an accompanying need, therefore, to increase confidence that the Department of Education and Skills will continue to resource schools to support

students with special educational needs and to increase parents' trust that schools will deploy these resources equitably.

Discussion on special education in Ireland has to date focused largely on inputs that are required to support students with special educational needs to participate meaningfully in school activities. Indeed in 2006, the NCSE identified one deficit as 'no structured emphasis on outcomes and an almost endemic fascination with inputs with no means of ascertaining what outcomes are being achieved for children with special educational needs' (NCSE, 2006).

1.4 NCSE policy advice

It is reasonable to expect that additional educational resources should drive improved educational outcomes for students with special educational needs. Given that most schools now have significant resources in place, the NCSE considers it time to move the focus away from inputs required towards an evaluation of how these students are engaging in school; the progress they are making and the outcomes they are achieving.

This policy advice is designed to take account of these matters and is underpinned by these six principles:

Principle 1 All children, irrespective of special educational need, are welcome and able to enrol in their local schools.⁵

Principle 2 All educational supports are allocated equitably to schools in line with the educational needs of students.

Principle 3 All students with special educational needs have access to available educational supports in line with their needs.

Principle 4 Students with special educational needs have an individualised assessment which informs teaching and learning and forms one part of an ongoing and cyclical process of assessment, intervention and review of outcomes.

Principle 5 Available resources are used to maximum effect to drive improved outcomes for children and State services work together to achieve this.

Principle 6 Parents' role as the natural and primary educators of the child is respected.

This policy advice builds on and is additional to the previous policy advice the NCSE has submitted to the Minister including:

- The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes (NCSE, 2011).
- The Future Education of Deaf/Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland (NCSE, 2011).
- The Education of Children with Challenging Behaviour arising from Severe Emotional Disturbance/Behavioural Disorders (NCSE, 2012).

The matters to be addressed in this policy advice are complex as children with disabilities can have needs that cross health, social, educational and functioning domains and

⁵ The NCSE considers that this is an important principle, while recognising that some children with complex needs may require a more supportive special school or special class placement.

require a multi-disciplinary response. A broader and co-ordinated approach is required which includes the Departments of Health, Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs working together to ensure no fragmentation in service delivery to children with special educational needs, particularly in light of the establishment of the new Children and Family Agency.

The Government's continued commitment to the EPSEN Act and its declared intention in the Programme for Government to publish a plan for the Act's implementation is welcome (Government of Ireland, 2011). The proposals in this paper were developed in line with the spirit and aspirations of the EPSEN Act and are in keeping with its objective to assist children with special educational needs 'to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity in an inclusive way, in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives' (Government of Ireland, 2004).

While the Act's full implementation is pending, the NCSE is concerned to ensure that available resources are allocated as efficiently as possible and with greatest impact for the education of the target students and their families.

Given the complexity of the issues involved, the NCSE consulted widely in developing this policy advice. A detailed description of the consultative process, those involved and the outcomes is provided in Appendix 2.

When developing policy advice, the NCSE is required to:

- provide an assessment of the implications of that advice for the resources, including financial resources, available to the State in respect of the provision of education, and
- have regard to the practical implementation of that advice (Government of Ireland, 2004, Section 20 (3) (b)).

A detailed background costs paper has been submitted to the Department of Education and Skills detailing the breakdown of additional costs associated with the implementation of the NCSE recommendations.

1.5 Structure of paper

An examination of relevant findings from national and international research and policy documentation is included in Chapter 2. The NCSE's policy advice is outlined in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

These sections are supported by information contained in the following appendices:

- Appendix 1: Setting the Scene: Historical and Current Context
- Appendix 2: The Consultation Process
- Appendix 3: Framework for the Professional Development of Teachers
- Appendix 4: Summary of Support Needs
- Appendix 5: List of Recommendations

2 Examination of Research and Policy Documentation



2 Examination of Research and Policy Documentation

2.1 Introduction

The policy advice proposals presented are informed by findings from national and international research papers and analysis of relevant policy documentation. Research findings are summarised according to themes with particular relevance for the matters considered as part of the policy advice contained in this paper.

Particular reference is therefore made to:

- parental views on the education of students with special educational needs
- assessment and identification of these students
- models of resource allocation
- monitoring and measurement of outcomes
- supports required by students with special educational needs
- teacher education
- support staff in classrooms.

2.2 Parental views on how students with special educational needs are supported in Irish schools

In autumn 2008, the NCSE commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC) to survey parents of children with special educational needs for their views and explore their experiences of the support their child received (Kane, 2010).

Based on an analysis of 1,394 valid completed surveys, the report found that overall, parents were generally satisfied with the support their child's school gave to their family with 75 per cent of respondent parents saying they were either satisfied or very satisfied. The most common support provided to participating parents' children was resource teaching hours followed by care support received from SNAs. Some parents identified problems, particularly around access to SNAs.

Nearly all (87 per cent) thought their child was in the right type of school for their needs. The main reason cited for this was that the teacher understood the child's needs. Overall, parents were satisfied with other aspects of school policy and support such as teacher understanding of their child's needs (70 per cent) and how the school welcomed their child (92 per cent). Most parents (79 per cent) thought that what their child was learning was appropriate to their needs and their school progress was good (78 per cent). Good communication between the school and parents was described as particularly important and most (76 per cent) thought their child's school welcomed parent views.

Most participants said their child had been formally assessed (94 per cent) and most were satisfied with the process (78 per cent). Some were concerned with the length of time it took to get an assessment and the consequent need for parents to use private assess-

ments. Others said communication could be better between education and health professionals. Parents were also less satisfied with the process of applying for supports and resources with nearly half (45 per cent) saying it was difficult (Kane, 2010).

The NCSE commissioned review of the resource allocation process (Kinsella et al, forthcoming) will further confirm parental concerns about gaining access to assessments on which the allocation of additional resources for low incidence categories of disability is based. As part of this review, parents report that schools find it difficult to prioritise psychological assessments for certain students requiring educational assessments because the needs of other students are deemed greater.

In reviewing the literature on special and inclusive education in Ireland from 2000-09, Rose et al found parents wishing to have their children enrolled in mainstream schools often face serious obstacles from 'intransigent enrolment procedures'. The authors consider these obstacles are often due to a lack of confidence on the part of principals and teachers that they can meet student need. However, once enrolled in schools, the pupils are considered to make good social progress but may continue to struggle academically (Rose et al, 2010).

Key finding 1

PwC report (2010) found parents of Irish children with special educational needs expressed high levels of satisfaction with school support for their children and with the assessment process. They expressed less satisfaction with the length of time it takes to get an assessment, communication between education and health professionals and the process of applying for supports and resources.

2.3 Assessment and identification of students with special educational needs

2.3.1 Purpose of assessment for students with special educational needs

International reviews of the literature on the education of children with special educational needs consistently identify early intervention as essential in their support (Parsons & Guldberg et al, 2009, Marschark & Spencer, 2009, Douglas et al, 2009, Cooper & Jacob, 2010). Early intervention and preventative measures can help to ameliorate the difficulties the child experiences before these difficulties become more deeply entrenched and thereby more resistant to intervention.

Timely and appropriate identification and assessment are important factors in ensuring that appropriate intervention commences as soon as is feasible. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) clearly states that where a student is not benefiting from a school's education programme (after the school has put measures in place) and where it is considered that his/her problems may arise from a special educational need, the school should arrange for an assessment of need. The Act gives detailed guidance on timelines within which any assessment should occur,

the matters that should be addressed in the assessment report and the people considered qualified to carry out such an assessment. These people include a psychologist; medical practitioner; the principal of the school which the child is attending or a teacher of that school nominated by the principal; an appropriately qualified social worker; and a therapist who is suitably qualified to provide support services for the child's special educational needs.

The National Educational Psychological Service (DES, 2007 and 2010) advocates a graduated approach to assessment of students' special educational needs. At the first level of classroom support (support for all), the teacher is responsible for the assessment of students in the classroom and may consult, as appropriate, with other teacher colleagues or educational psychologists where concerns arise about the progress of individual students. At the second level of support (support for some), assessment and intervention are directed at some students who require additional input. This usually involves consultation with school support staff and substantial assessment by teachers, with possible classroom observation by the psychologist. At the third level, assessment is generally characterised by a more intensive and individualised approach. Here, it is recognised that a few students will have more severe or complex difficulties which require the direct involvement of the educational psychologist in assessing the student's needs using a range of more formal assessment methods.

The purpose of the assessment process, as envisaged under the EPSEN Act and as subsequently outlined through the NEPS Continuum of Support guidelines, is focused on identifying student educational needs so as to inform the development of the teaching and learning plan for the student. This approach is supported by a number of studies of international practice.

One such study, commissioned by the NCSE, involved a review of the procedures for the diagnosis of a disability and the assessment of special needs education (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010). This study examined practices and standards in seven countries and a number of jurisdictions within these countries and compared them with the practice and standards in Ireland. The authors concluded that assessment of students with special educational needs should not be regarded as a once-off diagnostic event but rather as an on-going process closely linked to intervention. Assessment, as understood in this way, is viewed as an integral part of the cycle of assessment, planning, teaching and re-assessment. The authors advocated an 'interactionist/ecological' approach to assessment which builds up a picture of how an individual student is interacting with all aspects of the educational environment and which identifies barriers to participation, as well as supports needed to overcome those barriers (ibid). As part of this approach, a wide variety of different assessment methods is encouraged and the choice of methods is left to the clinical/professional judgement of those involved.

The report suggested that more emphasis should be placed on curriculum-based methods whereby assessment focuses on skill levels, plans interventions to move the child to the next stage and after a period of teaching monitors progress. The report referred to the three-tier intervention process outlined in the NEPS Continuum of Support Model and identified a strength of the approach as its capacity to promote ongoing, productive and serious collaboration between mainstream and special educators. Rix more recently

expressed concerns that medical assessment in Ireland is not always translated into educational practices that can inform teaching and learning in schools (Rix et al, 2013).

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education examined policy and practice in inclusive assessment across 23 European countries. While the report recognised the role of diagnosis within assessment procedures, its recommendations highlighted the need to shift the focus from an over-emphasis on initial diagnosis linked to resource allocation to continuing assessment conducted by teachers and other professionals that directly guides and informs teaching and learning. The agency's final report recommended that all assessment policies and procedures should 'support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all pupils including pupils who are vulnerable to exclusion and especially pupils with special educational needs' and 'all assessment procedures should focus on informing and promoting teaching and learning' (EADSNE, 2005:47-48).

Key finding 2

The assessment of students with special educational needs should be understood as an on-going process which is used to inform intervention and is an integral part of the cycle of assessment, planning, teaching and re-assessment.

2.3.2 Limited availability of assessments

The PwC survey (Kane, 2010) indicated some parental concern with the assessment process (12 per cent) which was mainly directed at the waiting time for health assessments or the limited availability of educational assessments for children with special educational needs. The forthcoming review of the NCSE allocation process (Kinsella et al, forthcoming) will confirm parental concerns in this regard and signal that a serious consequence of the limited access to professional assessment is that such access becomes dependent on the ability of the parent or the school to fund private assessments. The authors, who conclude that this challenges the equity of the system, recommend that where access to resources is linked to formal diagnosis and/or assessment, then access to such professional assessment must be equitable.

2.4 Models of resource allocation

International studies investigating the resource allocation models used in different countries (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010; Rix et al, 2013, Kinsella et al, forthcoming) suggest there is no one way used by all countries to identify students with special educational needs, to assess their needs and to allocate additional resources to them. Each of eight countries (including Ireland) examined as part of an overview of international practice and standards had its own unique system informed by cultural, socio-economic and political factors (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010). The authors make clear that these systems are constantly evolving and changing as stakeholders attempt to develop and improve them for the benefit of students with special educational needs.

2.4.1 Link between assessment of disability and allocation of resources

Current research findings suggest the focus of assessment procedures for students with special educational needs should be on identifying needs to inform teaching and learning plans. What role then should the diagnosis of disability play in assessment procedures and in informing the allocation of additional resources for these students? This is an important question given that in Ireland, the allocation system to support students with low incidence disabilities is based on diagnosis of a disability category and the extent of the allocation is linked to this category. For example, the school is currently allocated 85 per cent of 3.5 hours a week for students assessed with a moderate general learning disability (GLD) whereas it is allocated 85 per cent of five hours a week for those diagnosed with an ASD.

Discussion and debate in Ireland are ongoing as to whether the existing link between diagnosis of disability and resource allocation represents the most effective and/or efficient way of allocating additional resources to support students with special educational needs. A further question arises as to whether it represents the most effective use of professional and parental time. Rix, for example notes that both practitioners and parents are time-poor and that Ireland's current assessment processes exacerbate this (Rix et al, 2013).

The international review of practices and procedures (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010) indicated that most countries studied had a staged approach to identification of special educational needs, with some resources allocated directly to schools to address high incidence disability. Four of the countries studied (Australia, US, Ireland and Canada) require a student to be diagnosed with a disability before access to additional support for a low incidence disability is sanctioned. In these countries it is necessary but not sufficient to have a disability diagnosis as educational assessment must also indicate a special educational need arising from the disability. Four countries (England, New Zealand, South Africa and Germany) did not require a diagnosis of disability before releasing additional resources. Here, an assessment is required which identifies that the student has a special educational need, other than for the most prevalent special educational needs.

The study raised fundamental questions about how reliably people with disabilities can be classified into the categories of disability that underpin these resource allocation models, the validity of the categories used and the reliability of the assessments to place children in these categories. There is no uniformity across countries on how categories of disability are defined or the particular methods of assessment required to make the diagnosis or the professional groups involved in making the diagnosis. The number and nature of categories used also varies between jurisdictions, with the US listing 13 and Queensland using six.

Definitive categories create dilemmas as children can often exhibit a range of difficulties characteristic of more than one category – it may not be clear which one offers the best fit. The authors further consider that categorisation does not reflect the complexity of the special educational needs of individual children nor does it necessarily inform educational interventions. Children assigned to the same disability category often have different needs in terms of school-based learning as a wide range of ability/disability is represented within each category.

The authors expressed specific reservations about the system's requirement for precise IQ scores given what is known of the limits of cognitive ability testing and recommend that this be reconsidered. Their concern is also reflected in the impending overview of the NCSE resource allocation process where the system's over-reliance on exact psychometric scores is criticised along with the inflexibility around extending cut-off points for eligibility for resource allocation for low incidence disabilities (Kinsella et al, forthcoming).

Other authors have raised similar concerns about the limited value of categorisation for informing teaching and learning or resource allocation. Florian considers that children placed in the same category of disability may have very different learning needs, and classification can lead to stereotypes, limited expectations of the children so labelled, and exclusion (in Desforges & Lindsay, 2009). She questions the need to categorise in this way, and can find little evidence that disability diagnosis leads to improvements in educational provision and outcomes (ibid). Norwich (2007) distinguishes between the use of categories for administrative purposes, such as resource allocation and those used for teaching/intervention purposes. He concludes that research reviews and analyses consistently show the limited usefulness of categories of disability and, even when they have some educational significance, their general nature means they should inform rather than determine specific educational planning and provision.

The review of the NCSE resource allocation process (Kinsella et al, forthcoming), records schools' reported experience that the actual level of a student's learning need may not necessarily be reflected in their diagnosed category of disability. Schools report that some students in the 'high incidence' categories can have learning needs that are significant or greater than those of their peers assessed within low incidence categories – except that students in the latter receive more resources. As a consequence, schools report difficulty in supporting certain high incidence students with significant learning needs under the general allocation model.

Desforges and Lindsay (2010) suggest that evidence from academic theory and research supports the interactionist/ecological model as providing the best fit for the 'complexities of identifying and providing an appropriate education to children and young people with special educational needs' (Desforges et al, 2010:165). The interactionist/ecological model recognises that different factors interplay at different stages of a child's life which can affect learning. These include factors intrinsic to the child (genetic, neurological); factors in the child's home and school environment; and those within wider society such as housing or societal attitudes to disabilities. This model acknowledges 'that the needs of any child may be considered as comprising the needs (a) common to all children (b) common to children who share a disability or condition and (c) unique to each child (Desforges et al, 2010:116). While children may therefore have overlapping needs, important variations exist among children within any given disability category that reflect individual factors. This places limits on the usefulness of disability diagnosis.

Despite these limitations, the authors nonetheless acknowledge that diagnosis may be useful in providing some information on the child's special educational needs and may inform effective interventions. The report acknowledges that although it should not be a requirement for assessment of special educational needs diagnosis can be helpful in planning how to meet the child's needs and in providing information to parents.

A final concern is that there can be under- and/or over-identification of children from minority groups within certain categories of disability (Desforges & Lindsay, 2009, Lindsay et al, 2007). In a 2007 study, after controlling for the effects of socio-economic disadvantage, gender and year group, Lindsay et al found significant over- and under-representation of different minority ethnic groups within certain disability categories relative to white British pupils. The nature and degree of these disproportionalities varied across both category of special educational needs and minority ethnic group.

This is a matter of concern as placement within certain categories can lead to individuals experiencing lower self esteem and difficulties with peer relationships. Recent studies undertaken by Ireland's Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) have also raised questions on whether a disproportionate number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds are being identified with certain types of special educational needs (Banks et al, 2012; McCoy et al, 2012). These studies cite data from the first wave of the longitudinal study, Growing Up in Ireland (Williams et al, 2009) and appear to demonstrate that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely than their peers in other social categories to be identified as having special educational needs of a non-normative type, such as an emotional and behavioural difficulty (EBD). The authors suggest that this over-identification may be due to the subjective nature of EBD identification. They conclude that their study raises serious questions about the justification for EBD categorisation and propose that it may be necessary to think in different ways about the difficulties experienced by these children, so as to facilitate their learning and participation within mainstream schools.

Key finding 3

Research findings generally suggest there is little evidence to support the use of diagnosis and categorisation for the allocation of additional supports to schools.

In relation to the link between diagnosis of disability and allocation of additional teaching resources for children with low incidence disability, Desforges and Lindsay (2010) specifically recommended that:

- Diagnosis of disability should not be a prerequisite for assessment of special educational needs.
- Diagnosis should not be a prerequisite or determinant for the allocation of additional resources for a child or young person with special educational needs.

Rix et al (2013) also recommend the development of new models of assessment which remove the need for categories and formal health assessments and place the emphasis on educational assessment of need.

The above recommendations were supported by the findings of a study undertaken by the National Disability Authority into the practice of assessment of need under the Disability Act 2005 (NDA, 2011). This study found that health assessors, when assessing children under the Disability Act 2005, were conscious of the criteria for accessing additional educational resource allocation and the criteria for eligibility to health services. These

criteria were driving health assessors' diagnostic approach to assessment. The Disability Act 2005 was being used to expedite special education assessments, since the EPSEN Act has yet to be fully implemented.

The NDA report emphasised that assessment of young children with special educational needs should be ongoing and should be viewed as part of the normal process of assessment, intervention and review. It concluded that the resource allocation rules on supports for children with low incidence special educational needs was fuelling a demand for diagnostic assessments which assessors, in turn, felt compelled to conduct. The report recommends that the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Skills should implement the recommendation of the Desforges and Lindsay report (2010) that a diagnosis should not be a prerequisite or determinant of supplementary resource allocation for a child or young person with special educational needs (NDA, 2011).

Key finding 4

Diagnosis should not be a prerequisite or determinant for the allocation of additional resources for a child or young person with special educational needs which should instead be based on the needs of the child, irrespective of category of disability.

2.4.2 Current resource allocation system

The current system for allocating additional teaching supports to schools for low incidence disabilities is strongly associated with the use of diagnostic labels (Rix et al, 2013). These labels tend to stay with children over years to ensure the resources remain. In the authors' view, this type of labelling maintains negative attitudes towards disability. The report also suggests that for low incidence disabilities, the focus is on achieving a quantity – rather than quality – of hours provided. In overall terms, the authors conclude that the system contributes little to overcoming negative attitudes towards students with special educational needs nor does it help reconfigure how ability and disability are understood (Rix et al, 2013)

The forthcoming review of the NCSE resource allocation model will report that case-study schools feel excluded from decision-making on resource allocation for low incidence disability. This results in teachers and principals experiencing a reduced sense of professional autonomy (Kinsella et al, forthcoming). It will also indicate difficulties with resource deployment, especially in post-primary schools where instances were cited of students being unable to avail of resource hours due to timetabling or class organisation issues. The report will recommend that the views of school personnel should inform resource allocation and that greater use should be made of school-based data and school performance. In addition, it will also suggest that consideration be given to breaking the link between assessment and resource entitlement.

Key finding 5

The current resource allocation model, based on categories of disability, may contribute to maintaining a negative view of students with special educational needs. Greater use should be made of school-based data and school performance in decision-making related to resource allocation.

2.5 Monitoring and measuring outcomes for students with special educational needs

2.5.1 Measuring outcomes: What, how, who?

The NCSE has consistently emphasised the importance of monitoring the outcomes for students with special educational needs (NCSE, 2006 a and b) to ensure that they are making progress commensurate with their ability and State resources are being used to optimal effect. Little research has been conducted, however, into the outcomes of interventions or inclusive school provision in Ireland (Rose et al, 2010).

In order to monitor outcomes, it is first necessary to reach agreement on what should be measured, how it should be measured and which students should be included in the process. To inform these discussions, the NCSE commissioned an overview of how educational engagement, progress and outcomes (formal and informal) are tracked and measured internationally and in Ireland (Douglas et al, 2012).

This research report identifies a range of different outcome measures to evaluate how students with special educational needs are progressing in school. This includes measures relating to student engagement, attainment, attendance, happiness, independence and progress. The authors found that to date, system-based data collection focuses on attainment-related outcomes (for example, literacy, numeracy) and attendance-related outcomes (for example, attendance, school exclusion). Independence- and happiness-related outcome measures were not identified in relation to system-based data collection approaches while progress appears most clearly measured in longitudinal studies.

In relation to how outcomes should be measured, the study identified different approaches to including students with special educational needs in assessment processes as follows:

- Reasonable accommodation makes the process accessible while maintaining the same criteria, e.g. accommodations such as additional time, scribes, use of laptop and so on, which are given to students taking the Junior and Leaving Certificates examinations.
- Alternative assessment ensures that all people, irrespective of their ability, can be assessed appropriately, e.g. P scores in the UK to measure progress at foundation level of the National Curriculum for students with learning difficulties.
- Additional assessment includes areas of particular relevance to people with special educational needs, e.g. assessment of mobility, braille, Irish sign language (ISL) and so on.

In relation to who should be assessed, the authors argue that as assessment is central to school education, any approach should include all students. Those with special educational needs should be included in relevant national assessments and appropriate procedures should be available to make this possible. An inclusive assessment system is characterised by:

- Educational engagement, progress and outcomes are assessed and collated for all students. The resulting data should be appropriately disaggregated for students with special educational needs.
- Assessments should be made accessible for these students by having appropriate accommodations provided.
- There should be 'additional' assessment which allows areas of particular relevance to people with special educational needs to be included, for example mobility or use of specialist technology by students with physical and sensory disabilities.

(Douglas et al, 2012).

In accordance with the principle that any approach to assessment should include all students, this study recommends that a range of award-bearing assessments should be available to recognise the achievement levels of all learners in line with the National Framework of Qualifications. They particularly mention that a Level 1 assessment should be developed within the new Junior Certificate arrangements currently under development.

In a similar vein, the study recommends that the national literacy and numeracy strategy should be developed to include a commitment to developing accommodated and alternative approaches to the assessment for students excluded from the norm referenced standardised tests.

The conclusions of this study are in line with the recommendations of an EADSNE conference, Assessment in Inclusive Settings, held in Cyprus in 2008, which was the culmination of three years' work on this project. Over 150 conference participants recommended the adoption of principles concerning inclusive assessment. One of these was that all pupils should be entitled to be part of reliable, valid assessment procedures that are accommodated to meet specific pupil needs.⁶

Key finding 6

Outcomes for students with special educational needs should include measurements of student engagement, attainment, attendance, social development, happiness, independence and progress, as appropriate. All students should be included in reliable, relevant assessment procedures that are accommodated to meet their individual needs.

⁶ Materials from this project are available on the website of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education at: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/assessment-in-inclusive-settings/phase-2>

2.5.2 Individual education plans (IEPs)

For many years now, individual education planning has operated internationally, e.g. in the UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. There is a high level of consensus in the literature that IEP provision is key for careful and accountable educational planning for students with special educational needs (NCSE, 2006; Tennant, 2007; McCausland, 2005; Winters & O’Raw, 2010).

The EPSEN Act 2004 strongly emphasises the development of education plans for students with special educational needs. It provides a detailed description of how an education plan should be prepared either by the school (Section 3) or the NCSE (Section 8) for those students assessed as having special educational needs.

The EPSEN Act 2004 stipulates a strict timeframe within which assessment must be commenced and completed. Once it is established that the student has a special educational need, any subsequent education plan must be prepared within one month of the receipt of the assessment findings. The Act gives further directions concerning the plan’s content, procedures for its review and the manner in which it can be appealed.

The NCSE report on the Implementation of the EPSEN Act (2006a) attaches considerable importance to the provision of IEPs for pupils with special educational needs, stating that the plan ‘is the conduit for the services and provisions needed for the child to be able to benefit from education’ (NCSE, 2006:116). The report recognises that IEPs can take many forms ranging from relatively minor adaptations of the standard curriculum through to very complex individualised programmes.

Subsequent guidelines on the IEP process (NCSE, 2006b) draw on international experience in establishing good practice and recommend that effective individual education plans should be individualised and child-centred, inclusive, holistic, collaborative and accessible (p. 5). In the case of certain pupils with special educational needs, the guidelines state that group education plans may be the most appropriate form of intervention needed with some individualisation. Group plans might contain common targets for several students within a class who have similar difficulties, with individual assessment of whether targets have been achieved (NCSE, 2006b).

The Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000) introduced the concept of the individual profile and learning programme, which is a teacher record of the results of diagnostic assessment and includes medium-term learning targets and related instructional activities set for pupils requiring additional learning support in primary schools.

Douglas and Travers (2012) recognise that IEPs can assist students with special educational needs to gain access to an appropriate education. In addition, they consider that IEPs are a useful way for ‘accessing outcomes across a range of areas relevant to each child’s needs’ (Douglas et al, 2012:121). In their view, student engagement and progress in schools can most appropriately be measured as part of classroom assessment, which is accessible, appropriate and relevant to all students in the classroom, including those with special educational needs. The authors raise questions concerning the implementation of the IEP process: which students should have IEPs? How will achievement of targets be determined and by whom? What record keeping procedures should be in place?

While IEPs are not yet mandatory in Ireland, there is evidence that many schools are using individualised planning processes as they recognise that this represents good practice for students with special educational needs (Winters & O’Raw, 2010; Douglas et al, 2012).

Key finding 7

Individualised education planning is a useful mechanism for formulating, recording and monitoring outcomes for students with special educational needs across a range of domains. Individualised planning can take many forms to suit the particular learning needs of individual students or groups of students.

2.5.3 Monitoring outcomes

In Ireland, as in many other countries, the main focus of assessment tends to be on identifying the needs of the individual student to inform intervention, with less attention paid to assessing the outcomes of the intervention or the capacity of the school to deliver them (NCSE, 2006; Rix et al, 2013). This has led to a concentration on within child deficits rather than to an examination of the child’s learning environment. The NCSE report on the implementation of the EPSEN Act concluded that there had been ‘no structured emphasis on outcomes and an almost endemic fascination with inputs’ (NCSE, 2006:17). A shift to an outcomes focus challenges the system to take into account both the identified needs of the child and the capacity of the learning environment to assist the child to learn and develop according to his/her individual potential. This necessitates a more interactive approach where school programmes adapt and change in response to what works for the child and where outcomes are monitored on an ongoing basis in terms of the student, the learning task and the learning outcome (NCSE, 2006).

In light of the above reflections, it is interesting to note that the review of the NCSE resource allocations process (Kinsella et al, forthcoming) will report little evidence of systematic recording of the progress of students with special educational needs in the case-study schools. Schools reported a lack of review procedures to determine whether additional support is effective and/or to establish if such support needs to continue. Principals strongly advocated the need for more formal approaches to monitoring the progress of those students allocated additional resource support. The report recommends that more consistent and systematic approaches to recording the progress of students with special educational needs should be adopted to ensure that their progress is adequate.

Key finding 8

There needs to be a shift in focus from measuring inputs to systematically and consistently monitoring outcomes for students with special educational needs. Procedures also need to be in place to review the use and deployment of additional teaching and care resources in schools.

2.5.4 National database

Douglas and Travers (2012) noted that the use of national student databases (e.g. Scotland and England) enables data gathered from a wide range of sources to be cross referenced. This means that the same data (e.g. disability status, gender and ethnicity) has only to be collected once and that a number of outcome measures can be incorporated into the database, in addition to attainment-related outcomes. The authors conclude that the development of such an approach in Ireland would have enormous potential for supporting the measurement of engagement, progress and outcomes of students with special educational needs.

The authors recommend that a national student database should be developed in Ireland which includes a code for special educational needs, according to defined categories, to allow for the disaggregation of outcome data for such students.

Key finding 9

A national student database should be developed to inform planning and policy formulation.

2.6 Teacher education

Evidence in the research literature is consistent and significant (Ware et al, 2009; Ofsted, 2006) in supporting the finding that the key factor in student progress, including those students with complex needs, is access to experienced and qualified teachers. The OECD has suggested that the quality of teachers and their teaching is the most important factor in student outcomes (OECD, 2005:12). In its review of teaching and teacher education in 25 countries, the OECD suggested that raising teacher quality and standards is perhaps the policy direction most likely to lead to substantial gains in school performance (OECD, 2005:23). The recent first World Report on Disability states that ‘the appropriate training of mainstream teachers is crucial if they are to be confident and competent in teaching children with diverse educational needs’. The principles of inclusion should be built into teacher training programmes, which should be about attitudes and values not just knowledge and skills (WHO, 2011).

The evolution of inclusive education has brought major changes to international education systems. These changes have implications for teachers in terms of new skills and knowledge to be developed through teacher education (Mittler, 2000; Vayrynen, 2000; Winter & O’Raw, 2010). This in turn has given rise to the review and development of teacher education programmes across Europe.

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education has recently published a report of a project, *Teacher Education for Inclusion across Europe – Challenges and Opportunities*, (EADSNE, 2011). This report draws together information on policy and practice from 25 member countries and investigates how all teachers in these participating countries are prepared via their initial training to meet the needs of more diverse learners in the classroom. The report concludes that teacher education in many institutions

throughout Europe needs to be further developed if it is to effectively prepare teachers for diversity in inclusive classrooms. The report provides recommendations for teacher education and for policy makers in special education. It recognises that teacher education cannot work in isolation and that changes will require whole system reform and strong leadership from policy makers in all sectors and stakeholders in education.

One important output from the Teacher Education for Inclusion project was the development of a Profile of Inclusive Teachers (EADSNE, 2012). This identified the following four core values as basic to the work of all teachers in inclusive education:

- valuing learner diversity
- supporting all learners – teachers have high expectations for all learners' achievements
- working with others
- continuing professional development.

These core values must be accompanied by teacher competence which the report considers comprises three elements: attitudes, knowledge and skills. For each area of competence identified, the essential attitudes, knowledge and skills that underpin them are presented in the report.

These findings on the central importance of teacher education are supported by several NCSE-commissioned international literature reviews of evidence of best practice models and outcomes in the education of students with special educational needs. They highlight the need for suitably qualified teachers with specialist knowledge and skills to support those with special educational needs arising from visual impairment, autism, emotional and behavioural disorders and Deaf/Hard of Hearing students (Rix et al, 2013; Douglas et al, 2009; Parsons et al, 2009; Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; Marschark & Spencer, 2009). All reports state and/or recommend development of competencies or standards that define the specific skills, knowledge and understanding required for teachers working with students from these groups. In addition, these competencies and standards should underpin initial and continuing professional development (including specialist) for teachers.

Key finding 10

The key factor contributing to student progress, including those with complex needs, is access to qualified teachers. Competencies should be developed which define the specific attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding required for working with these groups and which underpin initial and continuing professional development for teachers.

2.6.1 Developments in teacher education in Ireland

The commitment to inclusive education enshrined in the EPSEN Act 2004, brought similar challenges to teacher education in Ireland. This has been acknowledged in the NCSE's Implementation Report (NCSE, 2006) and identified in Irish research (Kearns & Shevlin, 2006). Some important reports on primary and post-primary teacher education in Ireland

have been published which address the need for the capacity to respond to increasing diversity and inclusivity in schools. These reports include:

- Department of Education and Science (2002b) *Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century: Report of the Working Group on Primary Pre-service Teacher Education*.
- Department of Education and Science (2002c) *Report of the Advisory Group on Post-Primary Teacher Education*.
- Department of Education and Science (2003) *Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers: OECD Country Report for Ireland*.
- *Report of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS), 2004*.

The recently published Teaching Council's *Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers* sets out the learning outcomes that 'encompass the standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence ... which are central to the practice of teaching' (Teaching Council, 2011: 22). These guidelines provide a mandate, for the first time, that all programmes of initial teacher education (ITE) must include inclusive education as a specific element within the programme.

The Teaching Council has outlined that future programmes for ITE 'should include subject knowledge and pedagogy ...' (ibid:8). Specifically, 'foundation studies should develop students' understanding of, and capacity to critically engage with, curriculum aims, design, policy, reform, pedagogy and assessment and professional studies should include subject pedagogies (methodologies) and curricular studies and develop pedagogical content knowledge (ibid:11-12). The concept of an inclusive pedagogy fits well within these future programmes of initial teacher education.

Key finding 11

Several important reports on primary and post-primary teacher education in Ireland address the need for teachers to have the capacity to respond to increasing diversity and inclusivity in schools.

2.6.2 Further professional development identified as required for teachers in Ireland

In a recent review of international policies and practices pertaining to the continuum of provision for students with special educational needs, Rix emphasised the continued need for explicit training for all teaching staff at pre-service and in-service levels in Ireland in educating students with special educational needs. This training should have a particular focus on developing inclusive pedagogy skills (Rix et al, 2013).

The following sections outline further aspects of professional development identified as required for teachers in Ireland.

2.6.2.1 Differentiation and information on particular types of special educational needs

A small-scale qualitative study that reviewed curriculum access for children with special educational needs in mainstream primary classes revealed heavy reliance on SNA support rather than the use of a wider range of differentiation strategies to support such access (Ware et al, 2011).⁷ Differentiation strategies other than the support of an adult (usually SNAs) were used in only 11 per cent of the 187 tasks set for students observed by the researchers. The authors cite several references and guidance documents that demonstrate the importance of differentiation to facilitate access to the curriculum for children with special educational needs (NCCA, 1999; NCCA, 2007; DES, 2007; Dockerell & Lindsay, 2007).

The authors suggest the lack of differentiation strategies used was due to teachers' reporting a lack of time and a perceived lack of expertise and access to professional development. In the findings, 22 of the 33 participating teachers described their training in special needs during ITE as either minimal or non-existent. Only a minority felt prepared to work with this student cohort in a mainstream classroom as a result of their ITE. A common factor they noted as helpful was placement in a special educational setting. Those who had trained more recently were more likely to feel that the special education content in ITE had prepared them adequately.

The level of continuous professional development (CPD) availed of since ITE was limited and varied greatly. Many teachers wanted to access training and information on children with particular types of special educational needs in their class and commented on difficulties in accessing such information.

This report recommended that ITE courses should include both theoretical input on teaching students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms and practical classroom experience of working with one or more students with special educational needs. In this regard, it should be noted that the Teaching Council is currently involved in preparing draft guidelines on school placement for initial teacher education. In addition, the report recommended that all teachers, including class teachers in mainstream schools, should have access to CPD on special educational needs, including ready access to information about its availability.

2.6.2.2 Gaps in specialist qualifications for teachers in special schools

A research report on the role of special schools and classes in Ireland (Ware et al, 2009) identified gaps in specialist qualifications for teachers in special schools. Between only a quarter and a third of teachers had undertaken specialist training at diploma level or higher. The report recommended that those in special schools and classes should have timely access to continuous professional development, including opportunities to develop specialist skills appropriate to particular groups of students and collaborative working skills.

2.6.2.3 Professional development needs of teachers working in special education in mainstream schools

The NCSE awarded a research grant to a university in 2006 to support a research project that reviewed the professional development needs of teachers working in special educa-

⁷ It should be noted that this is a small-scale exploratory study, so the findings need to be treated with caution.

tion in mainstream schools (O’Gorman & Drudy, 2011). Its main research method was quantitative and involved distributing questionnaires to principals and learning support/resource (LS/R) teachers in primary and post-primary schools. The sample of respondents was nationally representative and the fieldwork took place in 2007 and 2008.

Survey findings indicated that individual education plans (IEPs) was the area of most significant need for teacher development.⁸ Other dominant areas cited were: knowledge of specific disabilities, administrative skills, testing, diagnosis and assessment and teaching methodologies relevant to students with special educational needs. There was a high level of requests for general unspecified and ‘up-skilling’ courses. Only primary teachers sought professional development in speech and language, mathematics and literacy.

The mandatory elements of programmes for future ITE outlined by the Teaching Council in its criteria and guidelines for such programme providers (Teaching Council, 2011) includes inclusive education. Interestingly, other mandatory elements have already been identified in this paper, such as differentiation, teaching, learning and assessment including school and classroom planning, behaviour management, and literacy and numeracy.

While requests for professional development in literacy and numeracy teaching were not high in numbers in the research cited previously, the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (DES, 2011) supports their inclusion as mandatory elements of ITE programmes. The strategy recognises that some children, including those with special educational needs, require additional help to learn literacy and numeracy skills. The strategy provides detailed actions to support enhanced literacy and numeracy provision for those with special educational needs.

Key finding 12

Further professional development identified as required for teachers in Ireland includes development of knowledge, skills and competence relating to:

- **Differentiation and information on particular types of special educational needs.**
- **Training for teachers in special settings, including special schools and special classes attached to mainstream schools.**
- **Planning to meet individual needs.**

2.7 Support staff in classrooms

Supplementary care support for students with significant care needs arising from disabilities is provided through the SNA scheme. SNAs are allocated to assist schools in addressing additional care needs to facilitate the inclusion of students with special educational needs. DES circulars state that SNAs’ duties are solely related to care needs and are strictly of a non-teaching nature (DES, 2002).

⁸ It should be noted that these data were gathered before the SESS offered training on IEPs to all schools.

When examining the role of support staff in classrooms, it is important to note that most research findings relate to teacher assistant roles in US or UK classrooms. The role of the SNA in Ireland, as detailed in Department circulars, is fundamentally different to the role of teacher assistants and paraprofessionals in the UK and US where they may play a part in supporting student learning.

It is still relevant to examine this literature, however, as a question has been raised in Ireland concerning the possibility of creating a new role of teacher assistant to bridge a perceived gap in educational support for students with special educational needs.

In 2011, the Department of Education and Skills published a *Value for Money and Policy Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme* (DES, 2011a). It found that provision of SNA support had contributed significantly to the enhancement of student experiences in Irish schools and that the scheme has assisted in enabling as many students as possible to be included in mainstream schools.

Rose and O'Neill's investigation into the working practices of teaching assistants in England and SNAs in Ireland supports this finding. They suggest that while there are clear differences between the two roles, both play a distinct and essential part in developing inclusive schooling (O'Neill & Rose, 2008).

However, over the last few years there has been considerable discussion and commentary in Ireland, as elsewhere, on provision of additional support staff in classrooms. In Ireland, much of this has been generated by a belief that students with special educational needs benefit from additional para-educational support and a consequent desire that the SNA be left in position for as long as the student can continue to benefit educationally from this. However the DES report (DES, 2011a) highlighted that a key focus of the SNA support should be to facilitate the development of a student's independent living skills and thereby remove the need for additional future support. Furthermore retaining SNA support on educational grounds conflicts with the SNA's role as stated in education circulars. Allied to this discussion has been extensive debate revolving around how the SNA role in providing care support in the classroom is to be understood and what distinguishes 'care' from 'educational' support.

Clear evidence now exists that schools have expanded the SNA role in Ireland to include an educational remit beyond the purely 'care' role (Lawlor, 2002; Lawlor and Cregan, 2003; Carrig, 2004; Logan, 2006; O'Neill & Rose, 2008, DES, 2011a). The *Value for Money and Policy Review* found that while the SNA role has not officially changed, over the years the application and use of SNAs in schools has. This has contributed to a lack of clarity on SNA duties and as a result the report called for more understanding of the role as envisaged in Department circulars. Similar calls have been made by other researchers (Carrig, 2004; Logan, 2006).

Key finding 13

The provision of SNA support has contributed significantly to the enhancement of student experiences in school in Ireland.

The SNA's role has been expanded by schools to include an educational remit not envisaged in DES circulars.

The issue of how support is provided in classrooms is widely debated in many countries, not alone in Ireland. In 2007, Michael Giangreco and Mary Beth Doyle noted the substantial increase in teacher assistant use in US schools to support students with disabilities over the last 20 years (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). In the authors' view, this has taken place without compelling evidence that it is 'educationally sound to deploy the least qualified personnel to provide primary instruction to students with the most complex learning characteristics'. The authors identified gaps in available research literature to inform policy makers about the effect of teacher assistant supports on the academic/functional achievement and social relations of students with and without disabilities and input from people with disabilities concerning the need for self determination and family-centred practices. They cautioned countries that had not yet adopted teacher assistant support to be cognisant of problems already experienced by countries which had done so. The problems cited for students included interference with peer interactions, social isolation and/or provoking of behaviour problems (ibid).

In 2009, the report of a large scale study, funded by the UK Department of Children, Schools and Families and the Welsh Assembly Government on the deployment and impact of support staff was published (Blatchford et al, 2009). The *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff* study set out to answer some of these questions and aimed to obtain reliable data on the deployment and characteristics of support staff and the impact of support staff on student outcomes and teacher workloads over a five-year period (2003-08). It covered primary, secondary and special schools in England and Wales and involved large scale surveys (strand 1) followed by a multi-method and multi-informant approach (strand 2).

The study found that the presence of support staff in the classroom had a positive effect on the teachers' workload, job satisfaction and stress levels. Overall it had a positive effect on teaching quality and the overall amount of individual attention given to students and on classroom control. While the authors viewed classroom-based support staff as having 'huge potential in helping teachers and pupils', the study raised serious questions about how such support is deployed in schools.

The study covered all students who received support in schools and was not restricted to students with special educational needs. Nevertheless, it found that most in-class support provided by teaching assistants was for low ability/students with special educational needs and that in many cases these students were routinely taught for much of their time by teaching assistants and not by teachers. Systematic observation analysis showed that at secondary level the more contact students had with support staff the less individual attention they had from teachers.

Classroom-based support staff had a pedagogical role, supporting and interacting with students and this exceeded time spent in assisting the teacher of the class. Their interactions with students, compared to that of teachers', tended to be more concerned with task completion rather than learning and understanding, and they tended to be reactive rather than proactive.

A consistent negative relationship existed between the level of support a student received from support staff and the progress they made in English and mathematics and science, even after controlling for students characteristics like prior attainment and special educational needs status. The more support students received the less progress they made. The

authors highlight the importance of ensuring that extra support must be well organised and structured, particularly given that lower attaining students are more likely to receive such additional support.

A more recent study (*Making a Statement Project*) compared the experiences of 48 students with statements of special educational needs for moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties to that of 151 average attaining control students (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). The findings indicate that students with special educational needs spent over a quarter of their school time away from mainstream class, their teachers and peers and that they were almost constantly accompanied by a teacher assistant. The study also found that teacher assistants bore the greatest portion of responsibility for planning and teaching for students with statements of special educational needs. The authors concluded that while the efforts of teacher assistants were well intentioned, the students with special educational needs received a less appropriate and lower quality educational experience compared to their average attaining peers.

These findings lend support to the conclusion of the DES *Value for Money and Policy Review* that the weight of educational research suggests it is inappropriate to delegate educational instruction to support staff and that such delegation would represent an unacceptable departure from the role of the SNA as outlined in DES circulars.

In contrast, a discussion paper was published in 2010 (Farrell et al, 2010) on the key findings from one aspect of a systematic review of the literature carried out by the Inclusion Review Group at Manchester University on the impact of teaching assistants (or their equivalent) on improving pupils' academic achievement. Findings here indicated that academic achievements of primary aged students improved significantly where the curricular intervention from trained teaching assistants is targeted and directed at identified difficulties in learning, typically in literacy. Findings are more equivocal where support is more general and not directed at students with identified difficulties.

Key finding 13

Overall, the presence of support staff in UK classrooms had positive effects on teacher workload, quality of teaching, individual attention given to students and classroom control.

Research studies suggest, however, that students with special educational needs spend a disproportionate amount of time with teacher assistants which can interfere with the teacher student relationship, undermine peer and social relationships and result in an inferior educational experience and outcomes for these students.

3 Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs



3 Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs

3.1 Introduction

The National Council for Special Education was asked to review how students with special educational needs are identified and their needs assessed to determine the educational supports required.

3.2 The current system of identification and assessment

3.2.1 Before school

There are several ways that special educational needs can be identified before a child enrolls in school:

- Diagnosis of disability at birth or before a baby leaves the hospital.
- GP visits or developmental checks carried out by the public health nurse.
- Assessment of need under the Disability Act, 2005 where parents/guardians of children under five on June 1st, 2007 can apply for an assessment because they suspect the child has a disability.
- Assessment through other HSE voluntary bodies or private professionals with whom the child is involved.

3.2.2 At school – continuum of support⁹

The Department of Education and Skills has published guidelines for schools which recommend a three-stage process (continuum of assessment and support) that schools and teachers may use for identifying and assessing special educational needs and for planning interventions, where required (DES, 2007a, 2010a,b). It should be noted that each stage involves assessing student needs, planning and implementing interventions and review. Time taken at each stage will vary depending on the learning profile of each student. The first stage is coordinated by the class teacher and carried out within the regular classroom. The second stage is usually coordinated by the learning support/resource teacher working alongside the class teacher. The third usually involves relevant external professionals in more detailed assessment and development of intervention programmes. This level is for children with complex and/or enduring needs whose progress is considered inadequate despite carefully planned interventions.

A professional assessment and formal diagnosis of special educational needs is required before allocation of additional teaching resources is sanctioned for a low incidence disability (autism, EBD/severe EBD, moderate and severe/profound general learning disabili-

⁹ It should be noted that when used in this paper, the term 'continuum of support' refers to a continuum of both assessment and support that is provided by the school. At stage 3 of the NEPS continuum, the term can also be taken to refer to external formal psychological assessment, where such is required by the individual student.

ties, physical and sensory disabilities, specific speech and language disability and multiple disabilities). A professional assessment and formal diagnosis of a disability and care needs is required before care supports can be sanctioned. This is sometimes referred to as the 'medical model' or 'deficit model'.

3.3 Review of the current system

3.3.1 Summary of views expressed during consultation

Set out in this box are the views expressed by group participants during consultation conducted by NCSE as part of the development of its policy advice. They do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the NCSE, which is set out in Section 3.4 below.

3.3.2 Strengths of the system

The consultation process highlighted significant benefits in the current system of identifying and assessing students with special educational needs:

1. The current model, which links resource allocation for low incidence special educational needs to diagnosis of disability, provides:
 - Individual professional assessment for students with more complex and enduring needs than are found in the general population of students.
 - Professional reports that are useful in assisting parents to understand the nature and extent of their child's disability and that can inform educational planning.
 - A professional and objective basis for the allocation of substantial teaching and care supports (up to €600 million per year) to students with special educational needs.
 - Parents with confidence that there is a clear and transparent basis for allocating these resources.
 - Schools with certainty that in the event of a diagnosis, the appropriate resources will be allocated to the school to support the student.
2. Professional assessments provide the basis for a differential diagnosis where presenting difficulties can be attributable to different conditions. Schools and parents considered this very important. For example, when identified at an early age, language difficulties could be attributable to a sensory impairment or intellectual disability or speech and language difficulties or autism. Professional diagnosis can be very important in ensuring the child receives the appropriate interventions as early as possible.
3. The staged approach to assessment and intervention, as exemplified in circulars 02/05 and the NEPS continuum of support documents (DES, 2007a, 2010a,b) is considered to offer a coherent response to identification of special educational needs and provision of supports (including intervention) for students with special educational needs. This system is working well in schools that are implementing the NEPS guidelines and is bringing about a more developed understanding of the need to graduate the level of school response to level of student needs.

3.3.3 What changes does the system require?

The consultation highlighted concerns with the system of identifying and assessing students with special educational needs as follows:

1. Not all students with special educational needs have access to the professional assessments on which resources for low incidence disabilities are based. Schools/parents report that it can be difficult to access the professional assessments required because there is a limit on the number that schools can access in a given school year and there can be long waiting lists for health assessments in certain areas. This means a long period of time may elapse before students can access additional teaching/care supports.
2. Health professionals are concerned that they are being pressurised to undertake assessments for the allocation of educational resources when such assessments are not indicated as required for health or social reasons. In addition, they report that they are sometimes pressurised to make a specific diagnosis even when the evidence may be insufficiently robust for a definitive diagnosis or to use a specific wording just to ensure that educational resources are sanctioned.
3. Professional assessments procured for resource allocation can have a narrow focus on cognitive assessments and IQ scores. An IQ score provides certain important information that can be used to build up a student learning profile. However it is only one element of this profile and may not address other important aspects of student development, such as adaptive functioning, communication, language, social and emotional development, life skills development, personal development and self esteem which can be very important for guiding educational interventions.
4. As it stands, the system represents a less than optimal use of scarce State resources as valuable professional time and expertise are devoted to assessments conducted for resource allocation, some of which may be unnecessary. This in turn results in an accompanying reduction in time available for delivery of necessary interventions and treatment.
5. Undertaking formal assessments and awaiting appointments for such assessments can be stressful for families.
6. Parents who want to ensure their child has additional supports in school can feel pressurised into procuring private, often expensive, assessments due to delays in the public system.

3.4 NCSE policy advice: identification and assessment of special educational needs

3.4.1 The EPSEN Act, 2004

The EPSEN Act, 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004) sets out a detailed and comprehensive process whereby a student must be referred for assessment if it is considered that a student:

- is not benefiting from the education programme in a school following measures having been put in place to meet his/her educational needs.
- the difficulties in doing so may arise from a special educational need.

The Act specifies precise arrangements concerning timelines during which the assessment must begin and be completed; matters the assessment must address; those qualified to assess and the involvement of parents in the process. Following assessment, an education plan must be prepared for the appropriate education of any child who is assessed with special educational needs.

The NCSE strongly subscribes to the principle that all students with special educational needs should have an individualised assessment which informs their teaching and learning programme. However, in this paper, we distinguish between assessment undertaken to identify a student's learning needs and inform intervention and assessment undertaken purely for diagnosis to satisfy criteria for the allocation of resources. The latter may result in the unnecessary or premature labelling of children with a disability, and may not always be in a child's best interest.

The NCSE considers that the sections in the EPSEN Act on assessment and education planning offer an effective route to teaching and planning programmes for students with special educational needs. They also provide guidance on future development of standards for assessment of this cohort.

The NCSE policy advice outlined in this paper is in keeping with the Act in terms of the importance it places on individualised planning for students with special educational needs and use of assessment to inform teaching and learning. The proposals build on EPSEN's provisions in:

- Recommending a focus on monitoring outcomes.
- Recognising the need to optimise the use of available teaching and other supports to drive improved outcomes.
- Explicitly stating that access to additional educational supports should not be conditional on the child having a professional diagnosis of disability.

Recommendation 1

The NCSE recommends that the EPSEN Act be fully implemented as soon as resources permit.

The NCSE recognises that the current economic climate makes it unlikely that the Government will be able to implement this recommendation in the short to medium term. The NCSE considers that, if the allocation of additional supports depends on availability of professional assessments, then parents must be able to arrange for assessment without undue delay. As an example, the HSE indicated in its Annual Report 2011 (HSE, 2012) that it was unable in 2011 to meet statutory timelines for the provision of assessments to eligible children under Part 2 of the Disability Act, 2005. In 2011 only 23 per cent of such assessments were completed within specified timelines. Reasons given for this failure to comply included the prioritisation of intervention over assessment, the effects of the recruitment moratorium and, significantly, the pressure to produce assessments that comply with the Department of Education and Skills resource allocation model. While progress has been

significant, the HSE acknowledges it has been uneven and slower than originally anticipated, due to differences between areas regarding resources available, the extent to which services have been developed and existing arrangements between service providers.

As access to professional assessment cannot be guaranteed for the foreseeable future, the NCSE considers it necessary, while awaiting full implementation of the EPSEN Act, to recommend the development of a better or more effective alternative to the current 'medical model' or diagnosis-based approach to identifying and supporting the special educational needs of students with low incidence disabilities. The proposed model aims to move the system towards ultimate implementation of the EPSEN Act. Assessment undertaken to identify needs and to inform teaching and learning will continue to play an important role in this new model through the implementation of the NEPS continuum of support.

3.4.2 Why change the current model?

The reasons the NCSE considers it important to change the current model of assessment and resource allocation are:

- Research has consistently identified early intervention as essential in supporting children with special educational needs. It follows therefore that these children should have immediate and timely access to the additional educational resources they require, rather than having to await the outcome of a professional assessment which can involve lengthy waiting lists.
- The level of additional support for students should be linked to their actual level of need rather than category of disability as the latter does not necessarily provide a true indication of need given the wide range of ability/disability that can be reflected within categories.
- The system for allocation of additional resource teaching hours for low incidence disability is based entirely on the professional diagnosis of low incidence special educational needs. However, many schools report extreme difficulties in accessing these necessary reports either because of long waiting lists for HSE professionals and/or the limited number of assessments that can be provided by NEPS psychologists. Some schools and parents can overcome this difficulty because they can pay for private assessments and then apply for additional resources based on the results. The NCSE considers it inequitable that allocation of additional State educational resources should depend on a parent's ability to pay for professional assessments or the proximity to HSE supports.
- The current system for allocating additional teaching support for low incidence special educational needs depends on a professional diagnosis of disability. As already indicated, there is concern that pressure is being placed on professionals to conduct assessments to trigger educational resources when that assessment may not be required to meet health and social care needs. Associated with this is the tension/anxiety created in parents and professionals that the report must contain specific statements in order that resources are forthcoming.

The HSE has signalled to the NCSE that it supports assessment where it is indicated that the child has health, social care, intellectual, emotional, behavioural or

functional needs and where such assessment might be of benefit. The HSE recognises that assessment may or may not lead to diagnosis of a disabling condition. The purpose of the assessment is to identify the needs of the child and the health services required to ameliorate the effects of the disabling condition (Disability Act, 2005).

The decision to undertake an assessment should be taken on the basis of the child's presentation of needs. The HSE has indicated to the NCSE that in the future, it will be moving away from undertaking assessments purely to trigger educational resources and which are not otherwise indicated as required to meet the child's health or social care needs. Were this to come about, it is highly likely that the basis on which the current system rests (i.e. professional reports) may not be fully available to the education system in the future.

The NCSE endorses the position that a child should not unnecessarily be subjected to assessment unless indicated as required to meet health or social care needs, as this can be a stressful process for the child and his/her family.

- Even if access to professional reports were fully available in a timely manner, the consultation process raised serious questions about whether the over-emphasis on procuring assessments for the purpose of educational resource allocation represents the optimal use of professional time, given that this takes valuable time away from providing intervention and treatment.
- The consultation process highlighted that the existing link between diagnosis and resource allocation promotes an ever expanding drive for labelling children and assessments for resource allocation, some of which may be inappropriate. Professionals expressed particular concerns that students may receive a lifelong diagnosis (sometimes from an early age) from a limited assessment process, with little attention to ongoing review and support. Such a diagnosis, even if fully remediated, could have ongoing difficult implications for the individual's future employment prospects where, for example, employers may seek information about previous medical history.

The NCSE considers that the current model of assessment and identification of children with special educational needs does not represent the optimum approach to delivering early intervention for children with special educational nor does it represent optimum use of assessment. In many instances, this process has become a high-stakes test to obtain additional resources for schools rather than to inform teaching and learning as one part of an ongoing cyclical process of information gathering, assessment, intervention and review.

Recommendation 2

A new model should be developed for the allocation of additional teaching resources to mainstream schools which is based on the profiled need of each school, without the need for a diagnosis of disability.

(see Chapter 5 of this paper: Resource Allocation).

3.4.3 One national system of assessment

While proposing to break the direct link between resource allocation and diagnosis of disability, the NCSE continues to recognise the fundamental importance of and necessity for professional assessment where required to inform health, education or social care needs. Diagnosis of disability can be an important part of this process. The NCSE considers, however, that students should not have to wait for an assessment before being able to access additional supports in schools.

The EPSEN and Disability Acts envisaged that the Departments of Health and Education and Skills should have one unified system to avoid duplication of assessments and provision of service. The NCSE considers the State should aim to have all services working together to provide a fully integrated assessment to ensure that students with special educational needs receive an appropriate education.

The NCSE considers that the relevant Government Departments (health, education, children and social protection) should work together to develop one national system of assessment which can be used to access services across all the relevant Departments, including welfare entitlements and educational and health services. This would avoid children having to undergo several assessments to access services. This goal was reinforced by health and educational professionals during the consultation process.

From an educational perspective, the NCSE considers that this assessment process should deliver information that can inform the student's individual learning plan process¹⁰ in the school situation. The assessment process should include information on the student's learning strengths and abilities, information on the areas of learning in which s/he experiences difficulties and the nature of those difficulties, information on learning style, information on cross-curricular areas including literacy, numeracy, language, communication, social and emotional development and behaviour, as appropriate and necessary. Finally, the NCSE believes the school should contribute, as appropriate, to this assessment which should form one part of an ongoing cycle of assessment, intervention and review.

Recommendation 3

The relevant State Departments (health, education, children and social protection) and agencies should work together to develop and implement one national system of assessment which can be used to access services across all areas.

¹⁰ In this paper, the terms 'individualised planning' and 'learning plan process' refer to all types of differentiated planning undertaken by the school for the student with special educational needs. This can include classroom/group level planning, individual profiles and learning programmes (IPLPs) (DES, 2000) and/or individual educational plans (IEPs) (NCSE, 2006). Use of the over-arching term is intended to clarify that not all students with special educational needs require the detailed planning involved in the development of an IEP.

4 Supports Required by Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools



4 Supports Required by Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools

4.1 Introduction

The National Council for Special Education was asked to consider the appropriate supports which should be allocated to schools to:

- Provide students with special educational needs with the opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, education and generally to develop their potential.
- Drive and measure improved educational outcomes.

Chapter 4 reviews the model of teaching and SNA supports in special schools and classes along with additional resource teacher and SNA supports to mainstream schools to ascertain if it provides optimal use of available resources or to determine if there might be a better model. It will also consider how an allocation model and the supports it provides should drive improved educational outcomes for students.

4.2 What supports are currently available?

4.2.1 Educational supports

Every mainstream school is allocated class/subject teachers in line with specific pupil-teacher ratios at primary and post-primary levels. These posts are allocated to the school to enable them to educate all enrolled students.

Along with class/subject teachers, mainstream schools have access to additional fully-qualified teachers to provide supplementary learning support and resource teaching support to students with special educational needs in mainstream schools. For the 2012-13 school year, there are 9,950 learning support and resource teaching posts available to the system, of which the NCSE can allocate 5,265 posts to support students with low incidence disabilities in primary and students with both high and low incidence disabilities in post-primary schools. There are 10,575 SNA posts available to support students with significant care needs arising from a disability.

Special schools and classes are allocated class teachers based on the pupil-teacher ratio specified for the particular category of disability of students enrolled. There are therefore much smaller class sizes in special schools and classes for students with special educational needs. Over 1,078 teaching posts support students in special schools and over 2,100 of the available SNA posts are allocated to special schools. There are almost 700 teachers in special classes attached to mainstream primary and post-primary schools (Source: NCSE, 2012).

The following additional educational supports are available to assist in the education of students with special educational needs:

- Assistive technology

- Specialist equipment
- Special school transport arrangements
- School building adaptations where necessary
- Enhanced levels of capitation grants for special schools and mainstream schools with special classes
- Extended school year scheme (July provision) for students with ASD and severe/profound general learning disabilities
- Visiting teacher service for Deaf/Hard of Hearing children and children who are blind or who have a visual impairment
- Support for students with a significant special care need arising from a disability
- Early intervention classes for children with ASD.

More detailed information on provision of these supports is provided in Appendix 1.

4.2.2 Health supports

Students with special educational needs may also have access to health supports provided through local HSE early intervention or school aged teams or through specialist teams. These supports include clinical psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and child and adolescent mental health teams.

4.3 Review of current supports

4.3.1 Summary of views expressed during consultation

Set out in this box are the views expressed by group participants during consultation conducted by NCSE as part of the development of its policy advice. They do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the NCSE, which is set out in Section 4.4 below.

4.3.2 Strengths of the current system

The significant investment in providing supports for students with special educational needs over the last decade was fully acknowledged and appreciated, along with the overall progress that has been made in the area. There was recognition that students with special educational needs are supported well in schools.

The consultation process confirmed that the supports already in place, as outlined in section 4.2 above, are those which continue to be required so that students with special educational needs are enabled to participate in, and benefit from, education and generally to develop their potential. These include additional teaching and care supports, assistive technology, school building adaptations, where necessary and specialist equipment, school transport, enhanced capitation grants for special schools and classes.

In addition the consultation acknowledged:

1. Substantial development in teachers' knowledge, understanding and expertise regarding the education of students with special educational needs. This is particularly the case in primary. Teacher education has contributed much to the development of this knowledge.
2. The individual education plan process works well in many schools. It is particularly effective where key people (parents, school staff and professionals, as required) are involved and where it is used as a working document in a student's ongoing education.
3. Allocation of responsibility to an existing teacher to act as co-ordinator of special education was considered to work well where the appointed teacher assumes responsibility for the overall organisation and planning of special education in the school; liaises with teachers, students and parents; and provides timetabled support to class teachers.
4. SNAs play an important role in assisting teachers to support students with significant care needs and have substantially assisted the inclusion of students with special educational needs in schools.
5. Finally, HSE-funded early intervention teams are working extremely well in certain areas where there is communication between professionals and local arrangements are streamlined. Professional interaction with early intervention teams has increased the system's awareness of children entering the primary school system. HSE therapeutic supports – such as speech and language therapy – or psychiatric interventions, where available, are considered beneficial to children.

4.3.3 What requires to be reviewed?

While acknowledging the substantial progress made in supporting students with special educational needs, issues were raised concerning how these schemes and supports might now be reviewed and further refined.

1. Additional educational support

There was general consensus that many students with special educational needs would benefit from further educational support in schools. This would improve literacy and numeracy skills, develop concentration skills, develop self-regulation skills in behaviour management, improve communication and language skills and increase independent living skills. These skills should be taught by fully qualified teachers trained and equipped to identify and meet student needs. Accordingly, the system's teaching and care supports need to be rebalanced to ensure that students with special educational needs have as much access as possible to qualified teachers within available resources.

2. Care supports

The consultation process acknowledged the considerable contribution that the SNA scheme has made to inclusion of students with special educational needs. The scheme operates well in many schools where SNAs work under the direction of the principal/teacher to support care needs. Concern was evident that the informal

expansion of the SNA role to include educational support is not appropriate to the care role. This informal expansion of the SNA role, without any change in official policy, results in frustration and a lack of understanding about the SNA scheme. It is creating an expectation that a student with special educational needs should have an SNA even when s/he has no care needs and does not meet the scheme's criteria. This in turn is driving an increasing demand for SNA allocations.

Concerns were expressed that while the scheme aims to promote independence, this is not always the outcome. Grave doubts were expressed concerning the model's suitability for post-primary schools. As students grow older, they are reluctant to have an adult accompany them about the school. There were also concerns about the presence of an accompanying adult erecting a barrier to participation and socialisation. Students believed the presence of an SNA could inhibit friendship formation.

3. **Teacher education**

While significant progress was acknowledged in the development of teacher skill and expertise in supporting students with special educational needs, further progress is urgently required, especially at post-primary where a focus on enabling curricular access for this group of students is required.

4. **Equitable access to supports/schemes**

There is concern that certain supports/schemes are available exclusively for students within certain categories of disability and not for others, for example, early intervention classes for children with autism and the extended school year scheme. While such schemes were generally welcomed by groups consulted, a question was raised about why such supports are available exclusively for certain categories of disability. It was suggested that children within other categories of disability might equally benefit from these supports and that eligibility should be based on level of need rather than category of disability.

5. **Health-funded supports**

The consultation process made clear that children with special educational needs require access to health-funded supports in a consistent, equitable and timely manner. These supports include clinical psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and child and adolescent mental health teams. Access to these important services is limited in many parts of the country, with gaps in services and long waiting lists hindering children's access. Parents expressed grave concerns about this and the length of time that children had to wait for assessment and the lack of follow-up interventions provided.

6. **Monitoring of outcomes for students**

An increased focus is needed on monitoring outcomes for students with special educational needs, including outcomes linked to the goals and targets set out in individualised education plans. Measures of social emotional competence and life skills should be included with academic outcomes.

Concern was expressed about the paucity of reliable data available in Ireland on students with special educational needs. This makes it difficult to ascertain if provision and interventions for these students are effective. The lack of existing standard school-based data systems to capture relevant student outcomes was also of concern.

Finally, it was suggested that developing a national database to capture information on students with special educational needs would be useful. This was regarded as critical for evaluation of efficiency and effectiveness of special education provision.

7. Provision of early intervention teams

Progress made on establishing HSE-funded early intervention teams and school based teams was acknowledged but this needs to be replicated countrywide as a lack of consistency across regions was identified.

8. Provision of nursing care

A small number of children have survived premature births or serious illnesses but continue to have chronic needs requiring ongoing medical intervention to ensure their survival. The fact that not all special schools serving these children have access to onsite nursing care was of concern.

9. Separate provision at an early age

Health professionals expressed concern about separate early intervention classes being created for young children with ASD aged three to five when:

- It is not always possible to predict their cognitive ability.
- They have not yet experienced intervention so it is difficult to predict future outcomes.
- In light of brain plasticity, it may not be best practice to place children in segregated provision at such a young age.
- The placement of children aged three in special school units concerns these health professionals as these children have no opportunity to mix with typically developing peers.

10. Transition arrangements

Transition arrangements for students with special educational needs are not standardised and are not always in place in schools. They need to be planned and put in place by parents and schools. They should be standardised and address transition from home to school, between schools and onward from school. Communication must take place between parents, schools and SENOs at these times and relevant information must be transferred efficiently. Schools should plan for transition and manage the arrangements proactively.

Groups consulted acknowledged that sometimes informal, local arrangements are in place for information exchange between schools. However this does not hold for all schools. Where arrangements and a good relationship exist between schools,

information transfer happens easily and effectively and is beneficial for the student with special educational needs. The concern is that this does not happen everywhere.

11. **Assistive technology**

Concerns were expressed about assistive technology provision. Some students and parents reported considerable delays in gaining access to the assistive technology recommended for them. Other students reported difficulties at points of transition when for example they are not allowed to transfer a laptop with software tailored to their needs to post-primary.

There were further concerns that teachers are sometimes unfamiliar with the technology and are not in a position themselves to support students to learn to use the assistive technology sanctioned under the scheme for reasonable accommodation in State examinations.

12. **Supporting students with mental health needs**

Concern was expressed about the lack of therapeutic supports available for students with mental health problems. Groups consulted believed that the mental health and well-being of a student can affect their learning ability so additional supports should include social and emotional support. Participants suggested that therapeutic support was necessary at times to enable a student to engage with learning and that in devising a learning plan for a student with a mental health need, there should be input from mental health professionals. There can also be changes in the emotional needs of a student and they can require additional supports at critical times. Immediate, short-term access to additional support in these circumstances is essential.

The provision of a behaviour support classroom was offered as one example of how a child's social and emotional needs could be addressed.

4.4 NCSE policy advice on supports required by students with special educational needs in schools

The NCSE agrees with the consensus position articulated throughout the consultation process that supports already in place in schools are generally those which continue to be required so students with special educational needs are enabled to participate in and benefit from education and to develop their potential. These supports need to continue to be provided, including additional teaching and care supports, visiting teacher service, early intervention, assistive technology, special transport scheme, specialist equipment, school building adaptations, enhanced levels of capitation grants, and the extended school year scheme. Some students with special educational needs also require early and timely access to health supports which should be consistently available throughout the country.

The NCSE also considers that the additional supports identified in its previous policy advice that apply specifically to Deaf/Hard of Hearing children (NCSE, 2011b) and to students with challenging behaviour arising from emotional disturbance/behavioural disorders (NCSE,

2012), should be in place.¹¹ For Deaf/Hard of Hearing children these additional supports included: the provision of comprehensive and objective information to parents from the point of diagnosis, including information relating to Irish sign language (ISL); the ongoing continuance of the ISL scheme for parents and children; provision of grants to schools to teach ISL to hearing students where a Deaf child is enrolled who uses ISL; assistive technology and acoustic treatment of classrooms; specialist qualifications for teachers in special schools and classes for children who are deaf/hard of hearing; and consistent and timely access to audiological services and speech and language therapy, where required.

Specific supports for students with challenging behaviour arising from emotional disturbance/behavioural disorders included: early intervention programmes with proven success such as the Incredible Years programme, additional and ongoing professional development for teachers so that they are equipped to manage challenging behaviour and meet the needs of students with EBD/severe EBD; educational programmes with proven effectiveness for students with EBD such as the FRIENDS programme, and timely access to child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) teams, where required.

The NCSE makes the following series of recommendations in relation to general supports that should be in place for students with special educational needs:

4.4.1 Professional competence

A wide range of professionals work with children and young people with special educational needs and with their families. They include health, social care and educational professionals. The NCSE considers that all professionals working with students with special educational needs should be required to develop and foster the skills necessary to meet the diverse needs of this population and should have in place protocols to share information where appropriate. It is particularly important that all professionals working with this group of students adopt an inclusive philosophy towards their education.

The Education Act, 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) clearly states the primacy of the teacher in the education and personal development of students in schools (*ibid*, Part V, Section 22 (1)). The principal has overall responsibility for ensuring that the special educational needs of students are met (DES, 2007). The class teacher has primary responsibility for the progress of all students in his/her class (DES, 2000:42, 2007:71). The class/subject teacher is therefore the professional likely to have greatest impact and influence on educational outcomes for this student population as they meet and work daily with the student.

Research findings consistently support the centrality of the teacher in the education of students with special educational needs and there is evidence that the quality of teachers and their teaching are the most important factors in student outcomes. The NCSE considers that students with special educational needs require qualified teachers who are trained and equipped with the skills necessary to meet their educational and care needs.

All teachers need to have the requisite skills, aligned with their respective roles in the school, to meet the diverse learning needs of students with special educational needs.

¹¹ Copies of the NCSE policy advice on the education of Deaf/Hard of Hearing children and students with challenging behaviour arising from an emotional disturbance/behavioural problems can be downloaded from the NCSE website at: http://www.ncse.ie/policy_advice/policy.asp

The requisite skills required are:

1. **Principal teachers** require the knowledge, skills, understanding and competence to lead and develop a whole school approach based on a firm commitment to the inclusion of students with special educational needs which is reflected in the school's policies and practices.
2. **Classroom teachers** require the knowledge, skills, understanding and competence necessary to provide for the education and care of all students but most particularly those with special educational needs.

Through their initial teacher education courses, teachers are equipped with many of the broad skills necessary to teach students they meet in the classroom. These skills need to be further refined and adapted to meet the diverse needs of those with special educational needs. This requires teachers to have:

- Commitment to supporting the inclusion of students with special educational needs in the activities of the classroom, to the greatest extent possible.
 - Knowledge about what works to assist students with special educational needs to learn, including up to date knowledge about evidence based educational interventions and the place of ICT in learning.
 - Necessary skills to:
 - Assess and identify the learning and care needs of students with special educational needs.
 - Plan for each student with special educational needs to have appropriate access to the curriculum, to set meaningful learning targets and to monitor progress and outcomes.
 - Differentiate the curriculum for students with:
 - ∞ intellectual or learning difficulties
 - ∞ behavioural difficulties
 - ∞ communication and language difficulties
 - ∞ physical and sensory difficulties.
 - Organise and deliver the teaching and care programme in the classroom, using a variety of appropriate teaching methodologies.
 - Involve others appropriately in the student's education or care including parents, team teachers, special needs assistants and health professionals.
3. **Support teachers** (learning support, resource and special class teachers) require the necessary specialist knowledge, skills, understanding and competence to complement the work of the classroom teacher and to contribute to the development of a whole school approach to meeting the needs of students with special educational needs. The NCSE considers it is no longer useful or necessary to maintain a distinction between learning support and resource teachers. Each teacher assigned a support role in the school should be sufficiently trained and equipped to assess and teach

all students with special educational needs and to advise and assist other teachers in devising and implementing particular interventions. Support teachers should develop particular expertise, over and above that of the classroom teacher in assessing and identifying special educational needs. Visiting teachers, pending a review of their role, should be viewed as support teachers with the specialist skills necessary to advise the classroom teacher and to support the student and his/her parents, particularly during the early years of a child's life.

Schools are strongly advised to build and maintain a team of teachers with the necessary experience and training to support the diverse needs of students with special educational needs and to have the requisite planning processes in place to ensure that adequate levels of CPD are there to underpin this objective.

The NCSE has provided an outline of what is required for delivery of appropriate professional development for teachers and principals in special educational needs (see Appendix 3). Initial education should have a compulsory module on the education of these children. It should be mandatory for all existing teachers to undertake CPD and its level and frequency should be determined by the Teaching Council.

The NCSE is aware that important initiatives are currently being introduced to schools which have a training dimension. They include school self-evaluation and the national strategy on literacy and numeracy. In order not to engender 'training fatigue', the NCSE considers the training on special education should be planned and implemented within a framework of training provided for initiatives, particularly those around assessment and educational planning.

Recommendation 4

- 4.1 The Teaching Council and the DES should ensure that teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, understanding and competence to meet the diverse learning needs of students with special educational needs.**
- 4.2 The Teaching Council should stipulate mandatory levels and frequency of CPD that teachers are required to undertake for teaching students with special educational needs within an overall framework of CPD for teachers.**
- 4.3 The NCSE considers that the DES should conduct a training audit of all schools to establish how many currently have access to a trained learning support/resource teacher.**

The NCSE considers that students with special educational needs, as with all other students, should be educated by fully qualified teachers registered with the Teaching Council. The consultation process pointed to a perceived need for additional educational supports for this population of students, which it suggested was to some extent currently met by SNAs. Examples of such educational needs included the development of organisational, social/communication and life skills.

The DES has previously stated that the mainstream teacher is responsible for ensuring that all students, including those with special educational needs, are provided with a learning programme and environment that enables them to gain access to the curriculum and to advance their learning (DES, 2007). The NCSE considers that the development of organisational, social/communication and life skills is integral to this process and should therefore be viewed as part of every teacher's responsibilities.

While this point is generally well understood at primary level, there is concern that the point requires to be re-emphasised, particularly at post-primary level. In light of this, the DES should restate the roles and responsibilities of teachers to ensure that in addition to academic progress, it is seen to be part of every teacher's responsibility to contribute to the student's overall development, for example in:

- Language, literacy and numeracy
- Social and communication skills
- Management and self-regulation of behaviour
- ICT
- Motor skills
- Organisational skills
- Attention and concentration skills
- Life skills, for example money management, buying goods in shops, ordering from a menu, reading bus timetables and so on

The roles and responsibilities of support teachers may also need to be restated and to contain explicit reference to the above elements.

Recommendation 5

The NCSE recommends that the DES clarify the role and responsibilities of all educational professionals in relation to special educational needs, including class teachers, and support teachers to ensure a full understanding of the nature and extent of their responsibilities.

4.4.2 Early intervention

Early intervention is universally accepted as a key component in supporting the education of children with special educational needs and can play a part in preventing difficulties from arising in the first place. In recognition of its importance, the State supports early intervention for these children by providing funding to a number of settings including:

- DES-funded early intervention settings attached to mainstream and special schools for children with autism (and physical disability in a few cases).
- Department of Children has responsibility for private pre-school settings supported by the early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme.
- HSE-funded early intervention settings attached to service providers.
- Private pre-school settings supported by HSE grant aid or HSE-funded pre-school assistant. (DES, Circular 0026/2012f)

As an interim measure, a home tuition scheme is available for eligible children with special educational needs awaiting an educational placement. Home tuition is for educational teaching intervention only and is provided on the basis that a school placement is not available. It includes children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), aged three upwards who cannot access a place in an ASD setting including an early intervention class. It is also available for children, aged two-and-a-half to three who have been assessed with an ASD based on the DSM IV or ICD 10 criteria (DES, 2012f).

The NCSE is not aware of any evidential basis for making early intervention provision available for some children with some disabilities and not for others. The NCSE further understands that many of the above settings provide different levels of support to children, for example the home tuition scheme provides for up to 20 hours per week; the ECCE scheme provides for 15 hours. The NCSE has also received advice from health professionals concerning the need for caution in providing segregated provision for children with special educational needs – to the effect that such provision be avoided for as long as is possible in their lives.

It is likely that there will continue to be some children with life-threatening medical needs who will require ongoing specialist support from birth. The NCSE recommends that all children receive their early year's education together in inclusive settings, to the greatest extent possible. This service, delivered through the Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, should be appropriately resourced to provide the necessary supports for children with special educational needs.

Recommendation 6

6.1 The ECCE scheme should provide the State's early intervention support for *all* pre-school children, including those with the most complex special educational needs and should be appropriately resourced to do so. Resources from existing State funded early intervention schemes should therefore be merged into the ECCE scheme.

6.2 The Department of Children, in the context of their responsibility for the ECCE scheme, should therefore specify the necessary qualifications for ECCE staff to ensure they are sufficiently trained in early childhood education and special educational needs.

4.4.3 Supports required by some children with special educational needs to access education in the school setting

4.4.3.1 Provision of care supports

It is clear that responsibility for the education and care of the student with special educational needs lies with the school and with the teacher. However, the NCSE recognises that the care support required by some students with special educational needs may significantly exceed what would normally be expected to be delivered by a classroom teacher given his/her responsibility to care for other students in the class. Examples include where

a student is unable to gain independent control over their own toileting and needs assistance during the school day or where the student requires the use of a hoist to access toileting facilities. Supplementary care support for these students with significant care needs arising from disabilities is provided through the SNA scheme.

Some students with very significant care needs require care support throughout their time in school, while many others will require it for only a short period until they acquire more independent living skills. Additional supports allocated to schools through the SNA scheme should be deployed on the basis of individualised educational planning which incorporates care plans. These plans should clearly demonstrate:

- The requirement for the care support.
- The way in which the care support will be used to benefit the student in reaching the goals and targets set.
- How the care support will promote development of independent living skills.
- Outcomes to be achieved by the student.

The EPSEN Act, 2004 states that students with special educational needs should be assisted to 'leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives' (EPSEN Act, 2004)

Schools should therefore be reminded that it is important to foster independence within the educational environment and avoid unnecessary dependency developing for these students. A balance must be found between allocating necessary care support and the child's right to acquire personal independence skills.

When fostering independence, it is especially important to match type and level of support offered to the nature and extent of the student's assessed needs. For example, a student with a visual impairment may have care needs that can be best met through mobility training or training in the use of appropriate technology. Similarly a Deaf student may have communication needs that can be best met through intensive support in acquiring a sign language or through accessing speech and language therapy. A child with an emotional and behavioural disorder may have care needs best met through teaching skills in self-regulation of behaviour. Matching the type and level of appropriate support to the assessed care needs of the child increases the likelihood that the child will learn to develop independence and grow in self-confidence over time. Table 21, Appendix 4 outlines possible support needs experienced by students with special educational needs and offers suggestions as to different ways in which these needs can be met within the educational system.

4.4.3.2 Further educational support

A general consensus emerged during the consultation process that students with special educational needs would benefit from further educational support in schools, focused on the improvement of language, literacy, numeracy, and communication skills, the development of concentration and/or self-regulation in behaviour management and so on. There is clear evidence that in Ireland the role of the SNA has been expanded by schools to include an educational remit as opposed to being the purely 'care' role (DES, 2011a). Presumably, at least some of the reason for this expansion is to fill the gap perceived to

exist in relation to the need for further educational supports. One consultation group suggested that a 'teaching assistant' role might be developed to provide educational support to students with special educational needs.

Clearly many parents and teachers greatly value the work of SNAs and believe that students with special educational needs benefit educationally from their support. How educational support is provided in classrooms, however, and the role of paraprofessionals in providing it, is a much broader issue than the issue of providing appropriate support for students with special educational needs. It is also an issue still widely debated in the research literature.

Research studies point to considerable reservations concerning the role of support staff in the classroom for students with special educational needs and they are equivocal about the effectiveness of this support (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Blatchford et al, 2009; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Findings indicate that paraprofessional support can inadvertently result in:

- Students with special educational needs having less teacher involvement in their learning.
- Becoming overly dependent on such support.
- Being socially isolated from other students.
- Such support does not necessarily improve their academic outcomes.

Given the growing international evidence that paraprofessionals can act as a barrier to a student's access to the teacher and full participation in classroom activities, the NCSE considers there is insufficient evidence, at this point in time, to support the introduction of a new teaching assistant grade to work specifically with students with special educational needs. The research, however, demonstrates a strong relationship between quality of teaching and outcomes achieved by this group of students. The NCSE believes these students can have complex learning needs and should be taught by fully qualified and experienced teachers equipped with the necessary skills to meet their needs. The NCSE therefore considers that the full educational requirements of students with special educational needs should be met by providing schools with sufficient fully qualified teachers who are equipped with the necessary skills to meet the needs of these students.

4.4.3.3 Clarification of the SNA role

Considerable discussion and commentary have focused on the existing SNA scheme. Much of it is generated by a desire to ensure that students with special educational needs benefit from additional para-educational support and a belief that the SNA should be left in position for as long as the child can continue to benefit educationally from such support. The retention of support on educational grounds conflicts with the SNA role as stated in circulars.

The NCSE considers the DES should clarify the care role of the SNA, as recommended in the recent Value For Money and Policy Review of the SNA scheme (DES, 2011a). Much of the confusion arises from the list of duties specified in Appendices 1 of DES Circulars O8/O2 and 71/2011, which give examples of SNA duties that might be allocated but which do not encompass their entire school role. The NCSE recommends the DES clarify that:

- SNA work should, at the principal's direction, be focused on supporting the particular care needs of students with special educational needs and should be modified according to these needs.
- SNA work should at all times be focused on developing independent living skills.
- The SNA may provide general assistance to the class teacher, under the principal's direction.

It should be further clarified that while SNAs are allocated to the school on the basis of significant care needs, this does not preclude them from engaging in educational activities related to the particular profile of the student they support, provided that these activities are carried out under teacher supervision. Such activities could include engaging in paired reading, presentation of work by students with special educational needs and so on. Parents and schools need to understand fully, however, that SNAs are there for care reasons only and that if another child with care needs enrolls, the SNA may be deployed to meet that child's care needs also.

Finally boards of management should ensure that SNAs receive sufficient training and have the necessary competence to undertake the duties assigned to them.

Recommendation 7

- 7.1 The importance and centrality of the teacher in the education and care of all students, including students with special educational needs, should be restated by the DES.**
- 7.2 The DES should similarly clarify the role of the SNA, as recommended in the recent VFM report.**
- 7.3 Additional teaching and care supports allocated to schools should be deployed on the basis of individualised educational planning which clearly demonstrates the requirement for this support and the way in which it will be used to benefit the student in reaching the goals and targets set.**
- 7.4 Boards of management should ensure that SNAs receive sufficient training and have the necessary competence to undertake the duties assigned to them in the school.**

The NCSE recommends that additional care support must continue to be allocated to assist schools to support students whose care needs are significantly above that which would normally be expected to be delivered by the teacher in the classroom situation. However, management bodies, post-primary teachers and students concurred that access to SNA support is not desirable for post-primary students unless absolutely essential. This is because it can impede their independence and socialisation needs at this age. It was acknowledged, however, that post-primary students can require short-term SNA support to meet particular care needs at a given point.

The NCSE considers that most post-primary aged students with special educational needs in mainstream schools require further supplemental teaching support from fully qualified

teachers, rather than care support. This holds for children as they grow more independent and progress through the latter stages of primary. Such supplemental teaching support should bring about improved educational outcomes for these students:

- By increasing their engagement in the post-primary curriculum.
- By improving literacy and numeracy skills.
- By assisting the self-regulation of behaviour.
- By supporting learning and teaching of subjects across the curriculum.
- By enabling post-primary schools to engage in models of educational support more appropriate to meeting the educational needs of this cohort of students, including in-class support, team-teaching and small group work.

The NCSE therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 8

- 8.1 The allocation of care supports to schools for students with special educational needs should be time-bound and linked to care targets set as part of the individualised learning plan process (incorporating care plans) drawn up by schools.**
- 8.2 Schools should report to the NCSE against care targets set in the individualised education plan to ensure external oversight of the use of additional care supports.**
- 8.3 Transition to post-primary should be recognised as a critical time for a student with special educational needs. Individualised education plans for fourth and fifth class students should reflect this and focus on ensuring that student care needs are, in so far as possible, ameliorated before moving to post-primary. Only students with chronic and serious care needs arising from a disability should require SNA support in sixth class in primary and in post-primary schools. Care supports freed up as a result, should be reinvested in further supplementary teaching supports for this group of students.**
- 8.4 Further supplementary teaching support from fully qualified teachers should be provided in post-primary to drive the improvement of educational outcomes for students by improving literacy and numeracy levels, by increasing student engagement in school and by enabling teaching support models to be put in place which more appropriately address their educational needs.**
- 8.5 Post-primary schools need to plan for enrolling students with special educational needs and put in place plans to assist students who may experience difficulties around transitioning.**

4.4.3.4 Allocation of additional care supports in special schools

The NCSE is aware that the level of care support required by most special schools remains relatively stable from year to year as in general, the profile of students enrolled in the majority of these schools does not change. Nevertheless, special schools must apply for care supports for these students on an annual basis and SENOs must process these applications. The NCSE is concerned that adequate care should be provided for students in special schools which should have some consistency regarding staffing levels from year to year.

The NCSE is seeking a way to increase administrative efficiencies for both schools and the NCSE to reduce the number of allocations that must be submitted by special schools on an annual basis. This recommendation is not made to save money but rather the NCSE intends that increased efficiencies will result in additional teaching time being available in schools to devote to teaching and learning and additional SENO time available for SENOs to advise and guide schools.

It is important to ensure that any change does not result in unnecessary anxiety for parents or schools. The NCSE wishes to remove uncertainty in special schools on the level of SNA supports as well as reducing an unnecessary administrative burden and an unnecessary cause of annual anxiety for parents, SNAs and schools. The basis for this allocation system should recognise that the care needs of many students in special schools remain relatively stable over time while at the same time ensuring that resources are not unnecessarily left in place where no longer required.

Recommendation 9

The NCSE recommends that a new basis for the allocation of additional care supports should be developed for special schools and classes.

4.4.3.5 Assistive technology

Assistive technology can play an important role in enabling some students with special educational needs to access education. The term includes a wide range of technologies from hearing aids, low vision aids, wheelchairs, to high-tech computer based communication aids. Technological progress is being made all the time so that the technology available is continually changing.

Schools are grant aided by the DES to purchase the type of specialist equipment essential for students with special educational need to access the curriculum (DES, 2013a). The grant aid is based on the student's needs, which must be determined and stated by a relevant professional. Special educational needs organisers (SENOs) make recommendations on school applications and the DES subsequently provides funding for the school to buy the equipment.

The NCSE is concerned that some students and parents report delays in gaining access to the assistive technology recommended for them. It was also reported that students can

experience difficulties in transferring equipment, tailored for their use, to post-primary school. The NCSE is clear that students are allowed to transfer such technology to post-primary unless it is required by another student in the primary school. The NCSE suggests that it would be helpful for the DES to clarify this position for schools and parents when the technology is sanctioned.

The NCSE considers that students with special educational needs should have timely and consistent access to appropriate assistive technology when required. Professionals must keep up to date with developments in this area so they can make informed judgements on what is an appropriate and cost effective recommendation to meet individual requirements. Teachers also must be supported to become familiar with the technology so they are themselves in a position to support students in its use.

The NCSE is aware that over €1.26 million is spent annually on providing assistive technology to those students with special educational needs who make new applications for such technology (Source: DES, 2012). The educational system depends on the professional report which determines student needs and makes recommendations. However, no standards are in place to guide these professionals and neither the DES staff nor the SENOs have expertise in this area.

In order therefore to ensure best use of this valuable resource, the NCSE recommends that a national policy for assistive technology be developed which addresses the:

- Purpose of the assistive technology scheme.
- Development of standards to guide professionals in making recommendations.
- Type of assistive technology that should be made available.
- Basis for grant aid to schools.
- Roles and responsibilities of relevant personnel to ensure consistency in technology provided.
- Training requirements.

In this regard, it should be noted that the National Disability Authority (NDA) recently commissioned research on approaches to providing assistive technology in Ireland (Cullen et al, 2012). This research points to the need for guidelines for primary and post-primary schools and professionals giving clear information on eligibility criteria and school responsibilities and describing the pathways for accessing assistive technology.

Recommendation 10

The NCSE should establish a working group, with AT expertise, to develop a national policy on standards for professional recommendations and to determine the supports required in an educational context and the best ongoing utilisation of these resources.

IT expertise in the education and training boards should be explored to establish whether these boards could have an ongoing role in providing expertise on assistive technology to schools regionally.

4.4.3.6 Extended school year (July provision)

An extended school year is currently available for children with severe/profound learning disabilities and those with autistic spectrum disorder. The NCSE understands this scheme was originally established for students with severe/profound general learning disabilities in 1997 following a High Court judgement in the case of *Paul O'Donoghue v the Minister for Health and the Minister for Education*.

In his judgement, Mr Justice O'Hanlon stated specifically in relation to continuity of education that: 'The lengthy holiday breaks which take place in the life of the ordinary primary school appear likely to cause serious loss of ground which may never be recovered in the case of children with severe and profound handicap. Accordingly to deal adequately with their needs appears to require that the teaching process should as far as practicable be continuous throughout the entire year.' (*O'Donoghue v Minister for Health [1993] IEHC 2*)

In 2001 the scheme was extended to include children with autism in special schools and classes and home-based tuition was allocated to children attending schools not participating in the scheme. It later expanded further in 2004 to include all children with autism receiving resource teaching support in mainstream schools.

However, the NCSE is not aware of any evidential basis under which the scheme was extended to include another specific cohort of students with special educational needs and not other categories. The NCSE considers the principle should be that access to available supports for children with special educational needs should be equitable and based on their level of need rather than their category of disability. Accordingly the NCSE recommends that:

Recommendation 11

The DES should clarify the purpose of the extended school year scheme (July Provision) and revisit its eligibility criteria.

4.4.3.7 Adapted school buildings/specialist equipment

The building unit of the DES has responsibility for funding adaptation of school buildings to enable access for students with special educational needs. The range of adaptations includes building an extension to incorporate a special class or unit, supplying a bathroom of sufficient size to accommodate a hoist, installation of ramps and/or lifts and supply of adapted furniture.

It is important that buildings are adapted before the student's arrival so that they are in place and staff have had sufficient time to become familiar with them. The building unit requires adequate lead-in time to allow for budgetary and procurement processes, for statutory approval for reconfiguration of building, for planning approval to be sanctioned, for architectural design, and so on. It can take up to two years to ensure the school has the most appropriate adaptation for the student concerned and to realise even a medium level of modification to a school building.

Enrolment, however, occurs generally in the six months before the student begins which can leave little time for the necessary building modifications to be put in place, where required. For this reason, it is very important that schools submit applications to the building unit as expeditiously as possible and as soon as they are become aware of an individual's requirements. Before expensive modifications are made, the school should be required to confirm the placement is available and that parents have enrolled their child and have given an undertaking that the child will take a place in the school.

In order to assist schools in making appropriate applications for building adaptations and specialist equipment, the NCSE should work with the DES planning and building unit to provide schools with expert advice on necessary building adaptations and any specialist furniture and equipment needed for a particular student. It must be recognised that many SENOs do not currently have such knowledge and expertise and would require specific training before having the knowledge to undertake this further dimension to their role. It should be noted that SENOs' work capacity is also limited as a result of the operation of the employment control framework.

Recommendation 12

12.1 In cases where adaptations to school buildings are required, schools should work out their requirements and submit an application to the building unit as soon as they know a certain student/s with special educational needs is being enrolled. Schools should facilitate this enrolment by having a flexible enrolment policy which enables early planning.

12.2 The DES should agree a list of specialist equipment which will be provided for all schools that enrol students with special educational needs who require such equipment, in accordance with the individual needs of these students.

4.4.3.8 Capitation grants

Capitation grants are paid towards the day-to-day running costs of schools, for example, heating, cleaning, lighting, maintenance of school premises and grounds and provision of teaching materials and resources. Enhanced levels, based on disability category, are paid to special and mainstream primary schools with special classes to assist them with the extra costs associated with setting up small classes (DES, 2013b). This is because class running costs are usually established by dividing the costs over the number of students – and the number of students in a special class is much lower than in a mainstream class.

At post-primary there is an enhanced capitation grant of €191 per student paid for those with special educational needs in special classes attached to mainstream schools (DES, October 2012). This is not in line with the equivalent grant paid to primary mainstream schools. Details of this scheme are provided in Appendix 1.

The NCSE is now expanding the number of post-primary special classes to cater for the increasing numbers transferring from mainstream primary. Consideration should be given to extending the enhanced capitation grants for special classes to post-primary on the same basis as primary to assist them to heat, light, furnish and equip these special classes.

The NCSE has also become aware that schools can incur significant costs in maintaining and/or replacing necessary equipment for students in special schools/classes (laminators or desks or chairs) due to greater wear and tear caused by some students with special educational needs or damage caused by incidents from students with behavioural problems. In the past, schools recouped some of this expenditure through the minor works grant which has now been withdrawn.

The NCSE recommends that:

Recommendation 13

13.1 The DES consider extending the enhanced level of capitation grant to post-primary schools with special classes on the same basis as primary schools to assist them with the increased running costs associated with these classes.

13.2 A funding mechanism is put in place to enable schools to replace necessary equipment for use with students in special schools and classes.

4.4.3.9 Transition supports

The consultation process consistently identified transition points as very difficult for many students with special educational needs. These included transition from pre-school to primary, from junior to senior primary schools, from primary to post-primary and onwards to further educational settings or to work. Students and their families require support for these transition so planning needs to take place far in advance of the transition points.

A body of Irish and international research findings supports this viewpoint, including a recent study commissioned by the NCSE on transitions from primary to post-primary school (Scanlon & Barnes Holmes, forthcoming). The NCSE is also aware that significant

work has already commenced through the HSE Progressing Disability Services Initiative (HSE, 2009) which aims to ease transitions for children and young people through the co-ordination of supports. The working group with this responsibility includes representatives from the HSE and educational services, such as the NEPS and the SESS.

The NCSE is concerned that adequate support should be available to students with special educational needs to ease transition between educational settings. It is also important that receiving schools are in a position to support the student when s/he arrives. For this reason, it is important that planning is timely and that sufficient relevant information transfers across educational settings to facilitate it. The SENO has an important role to play in facilitating the necessary planning necessary for transition.

Recommendation 14

The NCSE should develop and publish guidelines for transitional arrangements for students with special educational needs. These should specifically address planning required to ensure that advance arrangements are in place, outline the roles and responsibilities of parents, schools, educational and health personnel and advise on transfer of relevant information at times of transition.

4.4.3.10 Level 1 certification

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) provides advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on the curriculum for early childhood, primary and post-primary education and assessment procedures to be employed in schools (Government of Ireland, 1998). The DES has set out a new framework for Junior Cycle based on the NCCA proposals (DES, 2012g). Within this framework certain students may take level 2 learning programmes which are targeted at the learning and qualification needs of those with general learning disabilities in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories. The DES makes it clear that this level should be taken by only a small number of post-primary students unable to access level 3 programmes.

The NCSE welcomes the level 2 learning programme and qualification but considers the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) should have the capacity to capture the learning of all students. The NCSE therefore recommends that:

Recommendation 15

The NCCA should be requested to develop level 1 programmes for that small number of students unable to access programmes at level 2, NFQ. The NCCA should further consider how the achievements of students working towards level 1 qualifications are to be recorded.

4.4.3.11 Other educational services

A number of other services are available to support the education of students with special educational needs including the:

Visiting teacher service

The visiting teacher service is for Deaf/Hard of Hearing students or those who are Blind/Visually Impaired in mainstream or special schools and classes, other than special schools for children with sensory impairment. Visiting teachers, who develop more expert knowledge in relevant areas, advise and support parents and schools. They play a key role in facilitating the inclusion of students with sensory impairment in mainstream settings. The service is provided from the time of referral through to transition to third level education.

The service predates the expansion in learning support and the availability of resource teaching in mainstream schools, the establishment of NEPS, SESS and the NCSE. NEPS psychologists now have a role in identifying and meeting the needs of students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing or Blind/Visually impaired. SESS staff have a role in providing continuing professional development for these teachers and specifically provide them with support in Deaf education. SENOs make recommendations to the DES on applications for assistive technology.

In light of the other services now available, the NCSE believes the DES should review the role of the visiting teacher service.

Recommendation 16

The DES should review the role of the visiting teacher service in light of the other services now available in schools.

National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS)

The NBSS promotes and supports positive behaviour for learning by providing a systematic continuum of support to a number of school communities. In keeping with its mission statement of 'promoting and supporting behaviour for learning', NBSS support complements that of the SESS.

Limited availability of this service to post-primary schools should be noted. It is not available to primary schools.

The service provides a three level model of support to partner schools:

- Level 1: Whole school positive behaviour support.
- Level 2: Targeted intervention behaviour support.
- Level 3: Intensive, individualised behaviour support.

(NBSS, 2012)

In recent policy advice on the education of students with challenging behaviour arising from severe emotional disturbance/behavioural disorders (NCSE, 2012), the NCSE

recommended that an existing permanent teacher in every mainstream school should be trained in managing challenging behaviour and assigned particular responsibility for specified students. This would mean that expertise in the area would be internally available to every school.

Recommendation 17

17.1 The expertise of the NBSS should be used to inform training programmes for teachers in managing challenging behaviour, in line with the NCSE previous policy advice on the education of students with challenging behaviour arising from severe EBD (NCSE, 2012).

17.2 The role of the NBSS should also be reviewed to ensure cohesion across service provision.

4.4.3.12 Health-funded supports

Some students with certain special educational needs require access to a broad range of health supports to assist their development and learning. These include clinical psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, counselling, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy. The consultation process clearly indicated gaps in the provision of these services and suggested delivery was not consistent throughout the country. There are also long waiting-lists particularly for speech and language therapy and child and adolescent mental health services. This means parents experience difficulties in accessing these services for children who require them.

The NCSE considers that schools and health professionals need to work closely together to ensure best outcomes for children who require educational and health supports. Consistency is needed in how health supports are delivered throughout the country and the necessary health supports should be delivered as close as possible to the child's home or school.

In summary, early, timely, local and integrated delivery of therapeutic services is needed, on a consistent and equitable basis, for those children with special educational needs who require such services. This is in line with HSE policy as outlined in the *Progressing Disability Services for Children 0-18* (HSE, 2009), which is currently in implementation phase. The NCSE supports the HSE's commitment to implementation of this policy as the most effective way of ensuring delivery of adequate and appropriate health supports to children.

However, the NCSE is strongly of the view that children and young people with special educational needs require immediate access to adequate health supports which cannot await the full roll-out of this programme. Many examples exist where this is the case. Children with speech and language disorders require timely access to speech and language therapy, Deaf/Hard of Hearing children require audiological services, children with physical disabilities require physiotherapy, children and young people with mental health problems require psychiatric support, children who have life-threatening conditions require ongoing and immediate access to medical and nursing care.

Through consultation and through our own work, the NCSE is aware that these health supports are not currently consistently available to children and young people with special educational needs. There are certain special schools for children with severe and profound learning disabilities, some of whom have life-threatening conditions, without access to adequate nursing care. There are special schools for severe EBD where students do not have access to adequate psychological or psychiatric support. Children receiving health supports in primary schools are sometimes not able to continue accessing these supports in post-primary even though the continuation of such support is indicated.

The NCSE supports the roll-out of the HSE policy on progressing disability services for children, but is greatly concerned about the difficulties parents experience in accessing necessary health supports for their children with special educational needs and recommends that:

Recommendation 18

Children and young people with special educational needs should be recognised as a key health priority. Pending the full roll-out of the progressing disability services for children 0-18 programme, the HSE should develop a plan to provide adequate clinical and therapeutic supports for children and young people with special educational needs, irrespective of school placement.

4.4.3.13 Development of a national database on students with special educational needs

The NCSE recognises the paucity of reliable data available in Ireland on the progress and outcomes of students with special educational needs (Douglas & Travers, 2012). This makes it extremely difficult to ascertain, on any reliable basis, whether provision and interventions for this group are effective. This is critical if the efficiency and effectiveness of special education provision is to be evaluated. For example, it is important to establish to what extent these students participate in the life of the school, to what extent they are making progress commensurate with their own potential ability, what outcomes they are achieving relative to their peers without special educational needs; and what pathways they follow after leaving school. At this point, insufficient reliable information exists to answer these questions in the Irish context.

A standard school-based data system should be developed to capture relevant student outcomes, measured in relation to individual student starting points. The system should have one unique student identifier to allow maximum interaction with other databases. Outcomes should include measures of social emotional competence and life skills, along with academic progress. In addition, creation of a national database should be considered to capture information on pupils with special educational needs. This should take into account the particular sensitivity of the information being recorded.

Recommendation 19

As a matter of priority, the DES should ensure that relevant information on students with special educational needs is recorded as part of a national data base – to be developed for primary students and further developed at post-primary level. The information should be based on the development of a standard school-based data system with one unique student identifier to allow maximum interaction with other databases.

4.4.3.14 Comprehensive and objective information for parents

The NCSE is aware, through its own work and through the consultation process, that parents of children with special educational needs, require clear and unbiased information to guide them on the education of their child. They need to know where to take their child for assessment, the services available and where to access them, how the educational system supports these children, what they, as parents, can do to get their child ready for school and to support them while they are there. Some of these children have particular needs when moving from home to primary school or from primary to post-primary school or onwards from post-primary school. For example, it may take them more time to adjust to the post-primary environment and to get used to the lay-out of the school, to using timetables, to having different teachers for each subject and so on. Parents need the necessary information and knowledge to assist their children with these transition points.

The NCSE places great importance on delivery of a local service to schools and to parents/guardians through the local nationwide network of special educational needs organisers (SENOs). SENOs are centrally involved in informing and guiding parents and giving clear, unbiased information when parents are making decisions on their child's education.

Before the consultation process for developing this policy advice took place, the NCSE had already produced an information booklet to help parents/guardians understand more about their child's special educational needs, how these needs are assessed and the supports available in school (NCSE, 2011c). The NCSE is aware that the information in this booklet must be regularly updated. We are also aware that further information and guidance are required, particularly in assisting parents to choose a school and to ease their child's transition into primary and post-primary, between special and mainstream and onwards from post-primary schools.

Recommendation 20

20.1 The NCSE should provide further information for parents of children with special educational needs to build on the initial NCSE information booklet already published. In particular, the NCSE should provide information to parents about choosing a school and supporting their children with special educational needs to make key transitions.

20.2 The NCSE should develop and deliver a comprehensive parental information programme which is available in all areas of the country. The initial roll-out of this programme should be targeted at the parents of pre-school aged children.

5 Resource Allocation



5 Resource Allocation

5.1 Introduction

The NCSE was requested to consider the:

- Appropriate basis for allocating a quantum of supports to schools, taking into account student needs in the various school settings, the existing supports in place and the need for flexibility, given constrained resources.
- Appropriate allocation model for efficient provision of available supports.

5.2 Current model for allocating additional teaching and care supports

5.2.1 Allocation of additional teaching supports

In addition to the class/subject teachers allocated to mainstream schools for the education of all students, (including those with special educational needs, see Appendix 1), every mainstream school is provided with additional teaching supports so they can offer further support to students with special educational needs. Each school receives a general allocation of learning support teaching hours in line with either the number of class teachers (primary) or number of students (post-primary).

Primary and post-primary mainstream schools are also provided with resource teaching hours, (included in the general allocation of hours) so they can support students with borderline or mild general learning disabilities or specific learning disabilities (known as high incidence disabilities). The basis for this allocation is by reference to the number of class teachers at primary and by reference to historic allocations for such disabilities at post-primary. For the 2012-13 school year, post-primary schools got an allocation equating to 95 per cent of their high incidence resource teaching allocation at the end of the previous year.

Mainstream schools may apply for further resource teaching hours where they have enrolled students with low incidence special educational needs, e.g. autism, moderate general learning disabilities.

Special classes in mainstream and special schools only enrol students with special educational needs. They are allocated teaching supports on the basis of very small class sizes (for example, from 11:1 in the case of mild GLD to 6:1 in the case of ASD) and the number of teachers allocated to the special school is determined by the profile of students' disability within each special school.

5.2.2 Allocation of additional care supports

Special needs assistants (SNAs) are allocated to primary, post-primary and special schools to help the school address students' additional care needs so as to facilitate their inclusion in school. Schools may apply for SNA support for a student with a disability who also

has a significant medical need for such assistance, a significant impairment of physical or sensory function or whose behaviour is a danger to themselves or to other students or seriously interferes with the learning opportunities of other students (DES, 2005). These allocations are based on individualised applications and are subject to eligibility criteria laid down by the Department of Education and Skills.

Care supports are automatically allocated to special schools and classes in line with the baseline appointment ratios set out in the SERC report (see Appendix 1). However, they may also apply for additional care supports where the school/class has a greater level of need than envisaged under the SERC report.

Student care needs must be assessed and described by a professional (e.g. psychologist, doctor, occupational therapist, psychiatrist) who is also required to state why additional care support is necessary and to outline the benefits that would accrue to the student from receiving such care in the school setting.

The NCSE sanctions the appointment of SNAs to schools to assist teachers in delivery of care support. Their duties are solely related to care needs and are strictly of a non-teaching nature (DES, 2002).

5.2.3 Other supports

Schools apply for special transport, assistive technology, adapted buildings etc. on a case-by-case basis.

5.3 Review of the current system

5.3.1 Summary of views expressed during the consultation process

Set out in this box are the views expressed by group participants during consultation conducted by NCSE as part of the development of its policy advice. They do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the NCSE, which is set out in Section 5.4 below

5.3.2 Strengths of the current system

The consultation process clarified some important advantages of the current system of resource allocation which include:

1. The current system for allocating additional resources for low and high incidence special educational needs is known, is well understood by schools and is consistently applied. It provides certainty to schools and parents that adequate resources will be delivered to schools in a timely manner. This certainty has generated trust within the system, the importance of which should not be under-estimated.
2. The general allocation of teaching hours for learning support and high incidence special educational needs has removed the necessity for individual applications for additional teaching resources. This has reduced the administrative workload for schools and provides them with greater flexibility in managing and planning their

additional provision. It has also enabled them to focus on student needs with less emphasis on acquiring professional diagnosis of disability.

3. Schools are allocated additional resource teaching hours for the support of individual students on the basis of a diagnosis of low incidence special educational needs. Schools and parents value the existing link between diagnosis of disability and the sanctioning of additional resources. They consider the independent professional report can provide an objective and transparent basis on which to allocate resources. This model provides certainty to the school and the parent that the individual child will get resources once the professional assesses the child as being within a certain category of disability.
4. Following the diagnosis of disability, it is clear to parents, schools and professionals what additional time will be given to the school to support a child with a low incidence disability. This cannot be misinterpreted or open to degrees of interpretation or variance. There is a fear that any change to the system could result in schools coming under increased pressure from parents who feel that their child is not getting sufficient support.
5. Professional reports, if properly prepared and sufficiently thorough, can play a useful part in constructing a detailed profile of the child's strengths and difficulties which can be of considerable assistance to schools in providing a focus for individualised education planning.
6. Parents and schools also attach importance to the range of categories of special educational needs currently recognised by the DES for the purposes of resource allocation. These categories encompass a wide range of disabilities, including for example, Asperger's syndrome and emotional disturbance/behavioural disorders. The resourcing of these categories allows schools to support students with a multitude of needs, which include social and emotional needs in addition to academic needs.
7. Special schools over the years have generally shown flexibility in expanding the profile of students enrolled in order to cater for those with many complex special needs who present for enrolment. Generally, the groups consulted raised no significant concerns on the current class size or student teacher ratios operating in special schools and classes, provided that staffing ratios continue to be calculated on the basis of the profile of students actually enrolled in the school/class rather than the designation of the school/class.

5.3.3 What requires to be reviewed in the system

1. The consultation process acknowledged the considerable benefit to an administratively simplified process for allocating additional teaching resources for high incidence disabilities, in primary and post-primary mainstream schools. Where resources are limited, however, it is important that they are targeted where they are most needed while also balancing the need for administrative efficiency. The objective should be that children with the greatest levels of need get the teaching supports required so that best use is made of State resources in difficult economic circumstances.

Significant concern was expressed through the consultation process that the current generalised allocation process for primary schools did not fully achieve this objective as for the most part, resources are allocated to primary schools on the basis of class teachers employed rather than on the profile of students with special educational needs enrolled.

In May 2012, post-primary schools received an allocation for high incidence resource teaching equating to 95 per cent of the high incidence resource teaching support the school had in place at end December 2011. The remaining 5 per cent was retained for allocation to schools that at that time (May 2012) had no such allocation for high incidence resource teaching. While this data provided a reasonable basis at the time for the allocation of additional teaching resources to post-primary schools for high incidence disabilities, there was concern that it would not continue to do so as the data on which it was made will shortly be outdated.

2. The consultation process acknowledged the continued priority afforded to special education by Government in not reducing the number of resource or learning support teacher posts available for allocation during the 2012-13 school year. However, concern was expressed that significant adjustments have been made to the basis for determining overall school allocations of resource teaching posts whereby schools have been allocated 85 per cent of their sanctioned allocation for low incidence special educational needs and at post-primary 95 per cent of their historic high incidence allocation.
3. The consultation process considered that the mechanisms by which schools report on and evaluate planning and provision for students with special educational needs need to include:
 - How student needs are assessed to include formal assessment measures and curriculum and skills-based assessment.
 - Educational planning and monitoring of outcomes.
 - Teacher deployment and co-ordination.
 - Use and deployment of additional resources.
 - Assignment of roles and responsibilities of school personnel in special education.
 - Planning for the professional development for all staff in special educational needs.

There was concern that schools current reporting mechanisms are not standardised to include all of the above elements.

4. All groups consulted were concerned about students being required to have a formal diagnosis of disability before they can access additional resource teaching support and the inability of some schools and students to access such formal assessments. Both NEPS and the health professionals, in particular, expressed concern that their expertise could be optimised in delivering appropriate interventions directly to the student and the school rather than in providing formal assessments for the purpose of resource allocation.

It was suggested that students with conditions such as specific speech and language disorder, emotional and behavioural disorder and certain physical disabilities such as dyspraxia can respond well to appropriate interventions and such students would be better supported by provision of direct support from professionals rather than simply being assessed without follow-up support from these professionals. The inclusion of these categories within the learning support teaching service (that is, the permanent allocation of teachers put in place in primary and post-primary schools to support students with special educational needs) would reduce the demand on overstretched diagnostic and assessment services enabling professionals to intervene as appropriate in line with student needs, ensure those who currently cannot access an assessment are supported and provide schools with greater certainty regarding the level of permanent teaching support they have.

However, there was concern that any resources freed-up by such an expansion of the learning support service should not be dissipated elsewhere but should be fed back into supporting students with special educational needs. For example, it would be possible to re-allocate the hours currently used for these categories to the learning support teacher service. Professional resources freed up should contribute added value to students with special educational needs by providing adequate school therapeutic services.

5. Concerns were raised about the level of supports that are necessary for children with ongoing serious life-threatening medical conditions and those students with severe and profound levels of disability.

5.4 NCSE policy advice

5.4.1 Why change?

The NCSE is conscious that any proposed change to the system of allocating resources to support students with special educational needs is likely to provoke considerable concern and anxiety among schools and parents. The economic situation is such that any suggestion to change a State support scheme is viewed with mistrust and suspicion and as a way to introduce cuts. While the consultation process identified serious problems in the system, there was a sense that with all its shortcomings, the current system is familiar. Resistance to change exists because schools fear any change will elicit a reduction in their supports and parents fear it will result in a reduction of resources available to their individual children.

Any change to the resource allocation model therefore requires careful consideration, discussion and planning time to allay the understandable concerns of schools and parents. While acknowledging the reservations expressed by parents and schools during the consultation process, the NCSE considers that it cannot endorse continuation of the current system. The Constitution requires the State to provide for free primary education for all children (Article 42.4, Irish Constitution). It follows that access to additional teaching and care support should be available to all children on an equitable basis and should

not depend on a parent's ability to pay or the proximity to HSE supports. Further significant flaws exist in the model for allocating additional teaching resources in that:

- Students must await a professional diagnosis of disability before they can access additional resources for a low incidence disability.
- The level of resources allocated is linked to the category of disability rather than to the level of student need.
- There is no systematic attempt to assess outcomes achieved by those to whom resources are allocated.
- Additional learning support resources are not linked to the enrolment profile of the school so under a general allocation model, some schools do not receive the resources they require whereas others may have resources that are not warranted or required.
- Resources allocated to post-primary schools are allocated on the basis of historic data which will soon be outdated. For the 2012-13 school year the allocation to post-primary for high incidence disabilities was based on 95 per cent of the high incidence resource teaching support the school had at end December 2011. While this data provided a reasonable basis at the time for allocation of additional teaching resources to post-primary for high incidence disabilities, it will not continue to do so as the data on which the allocation was made will shortly be outdated.

5.4.2 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004

The NCSE recognises that the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004) provides a blueprint for delivering resources to students with special educational needs by its emphasis on individualised assessment, educational planning and monitoring of student outcomes through the individual education plan process. As in the first chapter, the NCSE recommends that the EPSEN Act should be fully commenced as soon as the resources necessary for its implementation become available.

The NCSE recognises that the current economic climate does not enable the Government to commence EPSEN in its entirety at present and that this recommendation may prove unachievable in the short to medium term. However, the NCSE strongly believes the EPSEN Act represents best practice for assessment and planning for students with special educational needs and has thus framed its proposals to harmonise with the Act's spirit and aspirations.

Pending the full implementation of the EPSEN Act, the NCSE considers that the process of allocating additional supports to schools for students with special educational needs can be strengthened by adopting an alternative model. The NCSE believes its proposed model will greatly benefit students with special educational needs as it will facilitate those with the greatest need with timely access to required teaching supports without need of professional diagnosis of disability. It is supported by NCSE-commissioned research studies which suggest that diagnosis of disability should not be the prerequisite determinant of additional resource allocation for students with special educational needs. These studies advise that such allocation should instead be based on identified learning needs rather than disability category.

The proposed model maintains positive aspects of the current system by providing a measure of certainty to schools regarding levels of resourcing and access to professional assessments which the NCSE considers necessary and beneficial to children. It also addresses some fundamental flaws identified in the current system by tailoring resources allocated to school profile, by breaking the link that makes diagnosis a prerequisite for resource allocation and by placing greater emphasis on monitoring educational outcomes.

5.5 Proposed new resource allocation model for mainstream classes

5.5.1 Essential elements required to underpin a new model of resource allocation

The NCSE considers a number of elements are essential to any resource allocation system to ensure the model is equitable, transparent and efficient in delivering resources to schools for the support of students with special educational needs. Those essential elements are:

- Equitable access to school.
- Professional development to promote teacher competence in the education of students with special educational needs.
- Resources allocated in line with the profiled level of need in schools.
- Additional resources deployed to students are linked to individualised educational planning processes and outcomes.
- Full implementation of the NEPS-DES continuum of support guidelines to determine appropriate interventions and achievable outcomes for students.
- Oversight of schools' use and deployment of resources to ensure they are used to the benefit of students with special educational needs.

5.5.2 Enrolment policies and practices

Section 2 of the EPSEN Act which relates to inclusive education has already been commenced. Generally management bodies and schools have responded positively to educating students with special educational needs in inclusive environments with children who do not have such needs. Many are now included in mainstream classes but evidence remains that not all schools are fully co-operating such as:

- Section 29 appeals taken on behalf of children with special educational needs who cannot get placements in schools.
- Guidance being issued by management bodies to boards of management for children with special educational needs, for example putting conditions on their enrolment and advising that it is a decision for the board. This makes parents feel they have to fight for a placement and that their child is being enrolled on sufferance. All mainstream schools are resourced in accordance with the same DES policy parameters and therefore they should all be equally welcoming of children with special educational needs. It is particularly disappointing that parents have had to resort to appealing

under section 29 of the Education Act to secure an enrolment for their children with special educational needs.

The NCSE is greatly concerned that the appropriate regulatory enrolment framework required to underpin section 2 of the EPSEN Act (inclusive education) is not in place. Parents may appeal a school's refusal to enrol a child, under Section 29 of the Education Act 1998. However, once the school's refusal to enrol is in line with its stated enrolment policy, the appeals committee has no basis with which to overturn the school's decision even if the policy is exclusionary. The NCSE considers that in the first instance, the child with special educational needs must be accepted into a school, preferably chosen by a parent, as otherwise the resources that could be available to the child through the normal allocation model become irrelevant.

During the consultation, parents and NCSE staff reported difficulties in securing placements for children with special educational needs. Considerable concern was expressed by parental and advocacy groups during consultation regarding the potential for current school enrolment policies and practices to be less than fully inclusive. These policies often contain caveats that mean the student with special educational needs will be enrolled only if resources are in place or their behaviour does not adversely affect other students. This is despite the fact that all schools are resourced in the same manner in line with Ministerial policy.

The consultation highlighted practices whereby schools place 'soft' barriers to enrolment by advising parents that a different school is more 'suitable' for their child or has more resources for supporting students with special educational needs. In other examples, schools have refused to enrol a child on the basis that they are not being allocated all the resources, particularly health-funded resources, they consider are required for a particular child. The NCSE is also aware of situations where schools have simply refused to open a special class for a cohort of students, where a need has already been identified, where there is space and where additional resources can be made available.

Recommendation 21

The NCSE strongly recommends that the DES introduces a robust regulatory enrolment framework for schools to ensure that

- **Every child with special educational needs is protected from school enrolment practices or policies with overt or covert barriers that block his/her access to enrolment in the school.**
- **Every child with special educational needs may enrol in the nearest school that is or can be resourced by the NCSE to meet his/her needs.**
- **A school must enrol a student with special educational needs if so directed by the SENO on the basis that the school will be provided with resources in line with national policy.**
- **A school must establish a special class if so requested by a SENO.**

Planning for the enrolment of students in post-primary school requires considerable detailed and advance organisation. Schools must issue place offers in line with their enrolment policies and parents must indicate their acceptance or otherwise. Frequently, further rounds of offers follow before enrolment is finalised. At this point, entrance assessments take place and class groups are formed. This will often involve extensive liaison with primary feeder schools. It has been brought to the NCSE's attention that the DES advises primary schools to administer standardised tests in literacy and numeracy in May of sixth class (DES, 2011b). This is a tight time frame to allow for transfer of this information to post-primary schools in sufficient time for the following school year.

Enrolment of students with special educational needs can require even more planning time where building adaptations are necessary and/or applications have to be made by schools for additional supports, such as teaching or care supports, transport, assistive technology and so on.

It is important that schools allow sufficient time for these processes to be completed so that parents and students know they have secured an appropriate post-primary placement well ahead of the new school year. The NCSE proposes that consideration be given to initiating discussions with the relevant school management bodies on the possibility of increased flexibility in the enrolment of all students into primary and post-primary schools. We believe this would facilitate adequate time being set aside for the necessary planning processes which in turn would reduce the levels of stress and anxiety experienced by parents and students during transition. It would also provide certainty to schools on staffing levels which will further facilitate proper planning for all students. Any change to procedures would need to incorporate a facility for enrolment of children who move into the area in the year immediately prior to their enrolment in school.

5.5.3 Allocation and deployment of resources in mainstream schools should be in line with students' learning needs and outcomes

The NCSE considers that the primary objective of the resource allocation model should be that children with the greatest levels of need get the teaching supports they require to enable them to achieve good educational outcomes, in accordance with their potential ability. In addition, the model should enable the best use to be made of State resources in difficult economic circumstances. The NCSE believes these objectives can be achieved by developing an allocation model for high and low incidence categories of special educational needs that is tailored to the educational profile of each school.

If such a model were to be developed, the NCSE considers that there are indicators now available in the system that can yield accurate information concerning the level of educational need in a school. This in turn gives a good indication of the school's level of special educational needs and provides a basis on which the allocation of additional resources can be tailored to each school's enrolment profile of students with special educational needs. These indicators include the following:

- Standardised test results (using tests with Irish norms such as attainment tests in literacy and numeracy, cognitive ability tests).

- Numbers of students that the school has exempted from taking the standardised tests in literacy and numeracy.
- Numbers of students assessed with a disability through the Assessment of Need process under the Disability Act or at stage 3 of the NEPS continuum of support guidelines.
- Information coming through from the pre-school system.
- Historic data from schools on levels of special educational allocations.
- Educational programmes followed by students in post-primary schools e.g. the numbers of students taking foundation level papers in certificate examinations or numbers of students that will follow the new level 2 Junior Certificate.

The DES may wish to give consideration to commissioning an Irish instrument to measure student attainment, in addition to the standardised tests currently in use. Measures of educational disadvantage could also be used to contribute to the development of the school's profile as a strong link has been demonstrated between levels of educational disadvantage and incidence of special educational needs in a school (Smyth & McCoy, 2009).

As is currently the case, the DES would determine overall resources available for each school year. In developing the new model, consideration would need to be given to the following matters:

- What is the appropriate weighting that should attach to each of the variables selected as an indicator of the level of educational need in a school?
- For what period of time should resources allocated to schools under the tailored model be left in place?
- What level of flexibility would need to be in place to respond to the needs of developing schools, schools with rapidly changing enrolment profiles or schools with rapidly decreasing enrolment?
- What type and level of external oversight of school's use and deployment of additional supports is necessary to ensure that additional supports are being used to the benefit of students with special educational needs and to drive improved outcomes?
- What kinds of appeals processes should be in place and for whom?

The NCSE considers a number of general principles should govern the development and implementation of the new model. Once additional supports are allocated to a school, the responsibility for their deployment should lie with the school. The DES should ensure that clear strong guidelines are developed and circulated to schools concerning the deployment and use of additional resources. Existing guidelines, such as the *Learning Support Guidelines* (DES, 2000), the *Post-Primary Inclusion Guidelines* (DES, 2007) and *Special Ed Circular 02/05* should be revised and updated in accordance with any changes to the system.

The NCSE considers that the level of educational support granted to any particular student should:

- Be determined by the severity of their need, as evidenced through the continuum of support process (DES, 2007a, 2010b) and as informed by any available professional reports.
- Be linked to the goals and targets set out in his/her learning plan process in accordance with the NEPS guidelines on the continuum of support. The NCSE considers that this link between the allocation of additional support and the individualised learning plan process moves the system towards full implementation of the EPSEN Act, which places considerable emphasis on the development of education plans.
- Take into account student outcomes as tracked through the learning plan process.
- Take into account individual factors (attainments, cognitive ability, adaptive functioning, mobility, communication and so on) and environmental factors (accessibility of school buildings, educational programmes available, skill-set of teachers and so on).

This means that in future, there should be no fixed level of support pre-determined in schools for any particular diagnosis of special educational needs. Students within the same category of disability can be allocated different levels of additional teaching support by the school, as appropriately differentiated on the basis of their learning needs and linked to the learning plan process. Schools are already doing this for students with high incidence disabilities and can be assisted through guidelines to expand this practice to individual students with low incidence disabilities.

The NCSE considers it should be a general principle that any reporting mechanisms necessitated by the external oversight processes should not unduly add to a school's administrative burden but instead should use existing information in the school through the normal planning and self-evaluation tools in use.

The DES should consider how to ensure that additional resources allocated to post-primary schools are used to support students with special educational needs without restricting their inclusion in mainstream classes. Appropriate ways to achieve this include team teaching, small group support or by setting learning support/resource teaching as options on the timetable. The additional resources should not be used to provide options for students who do not have special educational needs. Concerns were raised during consultation that certain post-primary schools used these additional resources to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio or to create small class groups for teaching higher level courses in post-primary or to fill teacher timetables to bring them up to the required teaching time.

Teachers providing learning support/resource teaching hours should have the experience and expertise necessary to identify and meet the learning needs of students they are supporting. The needs of the student should be at the centre of deployment of additional teaching supports and schools should be cognisant of previous guidance issued by the DES in relation to these matters in the *Learning Support Guidelines* (DES, 2000) and the *Post-Primary Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs* (DES, 2007).

Recommendation 22

- 22.1 The allocation of additional teaching supports should be in line with the profiled educational need of each school. Additional teaching and care supports should only be sanctioned on the basis that planning is in place for the students concerned, as part of the learning plan process. The deployment of these resources should be linked to the student's learning plan process, be time-bound and outcome focused.**
- 22.2 The DES should consider giving a more formal basis to the NEPS-DES continuum of support guidelines by developing them into a code of practice which it would be mandatory for schools to follow.**
- 22.3 The DES should arrange for guidelines to be developed for primary and post-primary schools to assist principals and teachers in deploying support to students. Existing guidelines should be revised and updated to take account of the new system.**

5.5.4 Robust indicators of special educational needs must be developed and agreed

The NCSE is confident that the design and implementation of a tailored allocation model for high and low incidence categories would help to ensure that available resources are allocated according to the needs of students in schools. It would also help to ensure that resources are not left in place where they are not required, relative to other schools, as can potentially be the case under the current general allocation model.

The NCSE understands that the proposed allocation model could result in widespread change and needs to be carefully planned and implemented. Any changes to the level of teaching supports must be properly managed and it may be appropriate to consider transitional arrangements as required. Most importantly, schools and parents must be confident that adequate resources will be delivered to schools in a timely and efficient manner.

To achieve this, the NCSE recognises that indicators for special educational needs must be transparent and sufficiently robust to instil confidence that they provide a sound and efficient basis for delivery of additional resources to schools.

Standardised test results are being proposed as one of a suite of indicators for educational needs available for use in the system. These are administered and corrected by teachers in the school setting. If standardised tests results are to be considered sufficiently robust to use as an indicator of educational needs, it will be essential to ensure that:

- The proposed standardised tests are sufficiently developed to indicate real differences in schools regarding levels of reading and numeracy.
- Tests used are regularly updated and standardised to ensure ongoing reliability and validity.
- Tests are regularly changed so that students do not become overly familiar with test items.

- There is consistency across schools in test administration, scoring and reporting of results.
- The DES issues guidance to schools concerning which students can be exempted from taking these standardised tests, so as to ensure consistency across schools.
- The reporting of standardised scores to underpin resource allocation does not prove a disincentive for some schools to bring about improvements in student attainment scores on these tests.

Other indicators to be included in the suite of indicators must be subjected to similar scrutiny to ensure they are sufficiently robust.

Recommendation 23

If the Minister were to agree in principle to the introduction of the alternative model proposed, the NCSE will then proceed to the next phase and establish a working group to develop it.

This will involve developing a suite of indicators of special educational needs to underpin a tailored resource allocation model. The use of standardised test results should be explicitly reviewed as part of the work of this group.

The NCSE accepts it will take time to refine the details of an effective new model of resource allocation, to test it, to put transition arrangements in place and to implement it. The NCSE notes that the report of the Special Education Review Committee was published in 1993 but that the Ministerial announcement giving effect to the automatic entitlement of children with special educational needs to additional resources was released in November 1998. While not suggesting that it should take five years to implement the new proposals, we strongly advise that sufficient time be allowed for their development and for confidence to build that a new system will be equitable, transparent and efficient. Finally, the NCSE considers it critically important that the education partners be consulted on developing the new tailored model.

5.5.5 Potential risks and benefits pertaining to the introduction of the new model

The NCSE is aware of potential difficulties which could arise during implementation of the proposed model and considers it is important that these are anticipated so they can be addressed in advance. Some of these difficulties are:

- Generating confidence and trust among parents and schools that the new model will result in an efficient and more equitable system of resource allocation that will ensure timely and focused delivery of teaching and care supports to schools to support students with special educational needs.
- Identifying robust indicators of special educational needs to underpin the new model and the weighting that should attach to each indicator.

- Ensuring that use of standardised testing does not present a perverse incentive to schools in the sense that it is perceived that the less successful a school is, the more supports it receives.
- Reassuring parents who may prefer that a specific allocation of support continues to be provided to individual children within different categories of special educational needs.
- Ensuring that schools are supported in the implementation of the NEPS continuum of support to overcome difficulties that some schools may experience in assuming greater responsibility in the deployment of resources.
- The impact on RACE, DARE and other schemes dependent on professional assessments should be considered.
- A risk assessment of the likely impact of the introduction of a new resource allocation system should be undertaken by the working group set up to develop the model.

The NCSE is strongly of the view that the current resource allocation system cannot continue because:

- It is inequitable since not all students with special educational needs have equitable access to the professional assessments on which the allocation of additional teaching supports is based.
- It rewards advantage as some parents/schools are able to procure professional assessments while others are not.
- It does not represent best use of State resources because allocation of additional learning support resources is not necessarily in line with the school's profile of educational need. This could result in resources being in place in some schools where they are not required relative to other schools.

The allocation of supports for low incidence special educational needs is based on disability category rather than on a student's assessed needs. A wide range of ability/disability is represented within these categories so not all children within any given category necessarily have the same level of need.

However, the NCSE is confident that if the risks previously outlined are adequately addressed, the new model's introduction will generate a more equitable resource allocation system with tangible benefits for students with special educational needs. These include:

- Students with special educational needs will have immediate and timely access to the additional educational resources they require, rather than having to await the outcome of a professional assessment which can involve lengthy waiting lists.
- Additional support will be linked to the student's actual level of need rather than to their category of disability which does not necessarily provide a true indication.
- A more equitable resource allocation system will be in place for students as there is less potential for some individuals to gain access to additional resources on the basis of private assessments when other individuals do not have access to such assessments.

- The reduction in professional assessments required to establish access to additional educational resources will result in more professional time available for assessments to inform educational planning and for necessary intervention.
- The necessity for students to receive a lifelong diagnosis (sometimes from an early age) from a limited assessment process is reduced. Such a diagnosis, even if the underlying condition is fully remediated, can have ongoing difficult implications for the individual's future employment prospects.
- Students with severe/profound learning disabilities will benefit from a reduced pupil-teacher ratio of 4:1.

5.5.6 Short-term changes to strengthen and improve current system

While waiting for the implementation of a new model, there are changes which, if adopted in the short-term, will strengthen and improve the operation of the current system. These short-term changes are as follows:

5.5.6.1 Deployment of additional supports should be linked to individualised planning processes and be the responsibility of the school in line with the NEPS continuum of support.

Additional teaching and care supports should only be sanctioned on the basis that planning is in place for the students concerned, as part of their learning plan process. Once additional supports for both high and low incidence special educational needs are allocated, the responsibility for their deployment should lie with the school. Schools should ensure that deployment is linked to the individual's learning plan process. The NCSE considers this link between the allocation of additional support and the individual learning plan process moves the system towards full implementation of the EPSEN Act, which emphasises the development of education plans.

Schools are advised to consult with the NEPS psychologist and work in line with the NEPS *Continuum of Support Guidelines*.

The principal should nominate a teacher responsible for ensuring that all additional supports are used for the education of children with special educational needs. The DES has previously advised that the principal, or a teacher nominated by the principal, might be assigned responsibility for co-ordinating provision for special educational needs within the school (DES, 2000:39, 2007:68.)

The NCSE is concerned at reports of inappropriate use, by some schools, of additional teaching supports as well as the lack of information on student outcomes. Schools should be advised that SENOS will be empowered to withdraw supports in cases where they are being inappropriately used. To ensure external oversight of the use of additional teaching supports, each school should be required to provide an overall annual report to the NCSE detailing how they are being used to the benefit of students with special educational needs and the outcomes students achieve through the learning plan process.

5.5.6.2 The general allocation model (GAM) should be refined to include specific reference to an increased number of categories of special educational needs.

Circular 02/05 outlines the process whereby all students with milder levels of certain special educational needs should be supported under the GAM with resource teaching hours being retained for those with low incidence special educational needs. The circular states that students with learning difficulties, including mild speech and language difficulties, mild social or emotional difficulties and mild co-ordination or attention control difficulties associated with identified conditions such as dyspraxia, ADD or ADHD are eligible to be supported under the GAM.

In practice, however, the NCSE has evidence that students with milder levels of social or emotional or behavioural difficulties, dyspraxia and so on are rarely, if ever, assessed as anything other than a low incidence disability. In a three year period 2009-12, numbers of students receiving resource teaching support in these categories increased 22 per cent (EBD), 30 per cent (severe EBD), 41 per cent (physical disability) and 59 per cent (speech and language disorders). The DES may therefore wish to clarify for schools that applications for additional supports for such conditions should only be made once schools have gone through the NEPS continuum of supports. This involves schools first supporting students with special educational needs through ordinary classroom teaching (including differentiation) or with additional school support from a learning support/resource teacher, where necessary, before moving on to seek external support in terms of formal assessment and specialist interventions.

Where schools use the continuum of support in this way, students with milder levels of difficulty have immediate access to additional support without a professional assessment. This gives schools a mechanism to respond more immediately to students within the specified categories and has the additional benefit of reducing pressure on waiting lists for external professional assessments.

Implementing the NEPS continuum of support in this way has the additional benefit of ensuring that children are not unnecessarily labelled. The NCSE considers this very important as there may be unforeseen, serious long-term consequences for children assessed as having certain special educational needs. For example where a student is assessed with emotional disturbance/behavioural disorders and where potential employers often seek information on mental health diagnoses.

The consultation process highlighted the desirability of increasing the range of categories of special educational needs to be explicitly referenced as included under the GAM. This means that individual applications for support would no longer have to be made for these categories and that students within these categories would not have to be labelled before gaining access to additional teaching supports.

The NCSE recommends that students within the following categories should in future be able to access support under the learning support scheme; acquired brain injury,¹² mild

¹² Children with acquired brain injury who do not have an associated low incidence disability are not currently included under the categories of special educational need recognised for resource allocation and have to make individual cases for it. While not born with a disability, these children have acquired one as they progress through the school system. It is proposed that in future, these children should have access to support under the general allocation of resources to schools.

hearing loss, students who have emergency, short-term needs following physical injuries sustained for example in a road traffic accident and students whose learning is affected by a family bereavement or by serious short-term emotional difficulties. Students with developmental co-ordination disorder (including dyspraxia) should also in the future be supported under the GAM which means this condition would no longer be considered a low incidence disability.

5.5.6.3 Criteria for certain categories should be restated and clarified

Over the years, a pattern has developed whereby certain categories of disability are diagnosed with much greater frequency than others. These include EBD/severe EBD, physical disability and speech and language disorders – see figures in previous section showing the increase in the number of students receiving resource teaching support in these categories over a three year period from 2009-12. Given the lack of precise criteria for distinguishing between mild and more serious levels of an emotional and behavioural disorder, the NCSE is aware that professionals are simply stating that the child has ADHD or ADD, without indicating the level of severity. The child is then allocated hours for a low incidence disability.

The criteria for certain categories should be restated and clarified to ensure that resources are directed towards those students with the greatest levels of need. The DES should restate the criteria for severe EBD to clarify that this category is intended for those with severe psychiatric conditions whose behaviours are not amenable to control by therapies or medication.

Similarly many children are now being diagnosed as having dyspraxia and being resourced for a low incidence disability. The criteria for 'physical disability' should also be restated to clarify that it is intended to include only those students whose severe levels of physical impairment significantly affect their learning. This category should include, for example, students who require additional teaching in the use of assistive technology to overcome the impact of paralysis or significant loss of mobility or control of their limbs. All other students in this category should be supported through the learning support scheme.

5.5.6.4 Adjustments to levels of supports in schools where they are no longer required

The NCSE is aware that the current allocation process does not provide for an adjustment to levels of supports in schools where they are no longer required, for example, where children have made progress. This can potentially result in resources being left in place even though a student's functioning has improved. There are a number of conditions where it is reasonable to expect that children's functioning can improve following intervention. Among others, these conditions include specific speech and language disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders, and certain physical disabilities. The system of resource allocation should reflect the reality that the needs of these students change over time and are responsive to appropriate intervention. Teachers must therefore be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify and implement the appropriate interventions required to bring about improvements in student functioning.

The NCSE considers that all additional resources for the above three categories should be allocated on a time-bound basis for a period of three years with the student's progress reviewed each year. The student's learning needs should be clearly stated in an individualised learning plan with learning goals and targets clearly specified. The review should take place as part of the continuum of support process and be based on the learning plan process and other information as deemed appropriate by the SENO. The review may involve other educational personnel, as necessary, such as the NEPS psychologist and Inspectorate. The review should provide the basis for the SENO to make the decision concerning the continued allocation of additional resources.

It should be noted that the introduction of a revised basis for resource allocation in post-primary schools for high incidence special educational needs for the school year 2012-13 has already brought about a reduction in NEPS assessments conducted to determine eligibility for resource allocation as opposed to informing educational planning. This should positively affect the availability of NEPS psychologists to undertake assessments to inform teaching and learning plans and to become involved in review of progress, where necessary, as part of the continuum of support.

If after three years and following an appropriate review, the student is found to have made progress in relation to goals but still requires additional support, s/he can continue to be supported under the school's GAM. If after three years and following regular reviews, the student is deemed to have made no such progress, the school should reapply on the student's behalf for additional resources. This application should set out a further case which demonstrates how the school has utilised the resources to date, the targets put in place and achieved by the student, the various interventions used and training courses attended by teachers. The school should also state how such additional resources, if provided for a further short time, would address the remaining concerns.

Under the current system, additional learning support and resource teaching posts are allocated to primary schools on the basis of their number of class teachers and to post-primary schools on the basis of students' enrolment. These posts are intended to support students who are eligible for learning-support teaching, those who have special educational needs arising from high incidence disabilities and those with other learning difficulties as outlined in Sp Ed Circular 02/05. Primary and post-primary schools with no eligible students enrolled in these categories should be obliged to declare this to the DES so that all available resources can be allocated to greatest effect.

5.5.6.5 Supporting students with mild general learning disabilities who have additional difficulties

The allocation of supports to students with Down syndrome with mild general learning disabilities was raised during the NCSE consultation process. The point was made that students with Down syndrome can often have additional complex difficulties relative to other children with a mild learning disability and that it should be resourced as a low incidence disability. The additional difficulties include auditory processing, medical needs, speech/language difficulties and motor difficulties, which require more intensive support than other children within the category of mild GLD.

The NCSE is aware that many students within the mild range of intellectual disabilities have additional difficulties such as those outlined. The NCSE could not establish an evidence base to support a recommendation that a child with Down syndrome should be allocated supports over and above those children or other children with syndromes that also have associated co-morbid conditions. However, the NCSE recommends that the DES should reiterate to schools that additional learning support resources can be allocated differentially in accordance with student levels of learning needs (DES, 2005) and in accordance with the NEPS continuum of support.

The case was also made that many children with Down syndrome (in the mild GLD category) should be considered to have a speech and language disorder in addition to their intellectual disability. This is because their language disorder is very severe relative to their cognitive levels and cannot therefore be adjudged to be due to developmental delay only. The current DES criteria for specific speech and language disorders stipulates that a child must be assessed in the average IQ range to qualify for additional resource teaching under this category.

The NCSE has carefully considered the submission made by Down Syndrome Ireland in this regard. Under the new model being proposed by NCSE, children will be allocated additional resources in line with their level of need rather than by disability category. The NCSE is confident that the introduction of this model will overcome the difficulty posed by the previous example as all children with mild general learning disabilities who have additional difficulties will be supported according to their level of need and in line with their learning plan process.

In the meantime, schools are reminded that they can differentiate the level of learning support granted to ensure that available resources are used to support children in line with their needs. The forthcoming review of NCSE resource allocation process and evaluation of deployment of resources in schools (Kinsella et al, forthcoming) will show that many schools already do differentiate the level of support granted under the GAM. In a survey of 179 primary schools, 52% of respondents indicated that children with high incidence disabilities receive one-to-one tuition, as one form of support in their schools.

5.5.6.6 Teacher travelling time between schools should be minimised

In the 2012-13 school year, a network of over 2,500 full-time, permanent resource posts were put in place in almost 1,700 base primary schools throughout the country (DES, 2012a). These posts were allocated to teachers to undertake NCSE approved low incidence resource hours in the base school or in neighbouring schools.

While this is a positive development, the NCSE is concerned that students may be losing valuable tuition time because resource teachers are travelling some distance between their base-school and the other schools they are supporting. Schools should make every effort to minimise the tuition time lost in this way. In addition the DES should undertake an analysis of the time spent in teachers travelling between schools and where significant tuition time is being lost to students, some time allowance should be made to the schools concerned.

The NCSE recommends the following short-term changes be introduced to strengthen the current system of resource allocation:

Recommendation 24

- 24.1** Before additional teaching and care supports are sanctioned for students with special educational needs, schools should confirm that planning is in place for the students concerned, as part of the learning plan process. Once additional supports for students with special educational needs arising from both high and low incidence special educational needs are allocated to a school, their deployment should be linked to individualised planning processes in line with the NEPS continuum of provision.
- 24.2** Schools should be required to provide annual reports to the NCSE on progress made and student outcomes achieved through the learning plan process.
- 24.3** Students with acquired brain injury; mild hearing loss; developmental co-ordination disorder (including dyspraxia), and/or students who have emergency short-term needs following physical injuries sustained, for example, in a road traffic accident and those whose learning is affected by a family bereavement or by serious short-term emotional difficulties should have access to learning support teachers.
- 24.4** The DES should restate and clarify the criteria for access to additional supports for students with physical disabilities and severe EBD to ensure that resources are directed at students with the greatest need within these categories.
- 24.5** Conditions exist where student functioning can improve through intervention over time. These conditions include specific speech and language disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders and certain physical disabilities. The additional resources provided for these categories should therefore be provided on a time-bound basis for a period of three years and student progress should be annually reviewed by the school, and where necessary, with the NEPS psychologist.
- 24.6** The DES should reiterate that additional teaching resources for students with learning support and high incidence disabilities can be allocated differentially in accordance with their learning needs (DES, 2005).

5.5.7 Designation of special schools as national schools

All special schools are currently designated as national schools and operate under the Rules for National Schools (Department of Education, 1965). This was raised as an issue during consultation particularly given the increased transfer of students at post-primary age to special schools. Questions arose as to whether there should be primary and post-primary special schools or whether a new sector of school should be introduced into the

system which would be a 'special school' as opposed to being a primary or secondary special school.

The current system was created at a time when it was expected that most students in special schools would follow a primary curriculum and benefit by being taught by primary teachers. Now students can take FETAC level courses and Junior Certificate examinations in special schools. This raises the possibility that post-primary teachers are required for some, although not all, students of post-primary age in special schools. Equally, students of post-primary age who are following a primary curriculum in a special school should have access to primary-trained teachers.

It was suggested that the rules of any new type of special school introduced could be tailored to the needs of its students whether they are primary or post-primary age. Rules concerning teacher qualifications, length of school day, length of school year, should reflect the abilities, needs and age profiles of students attending these special schools. For example, post-primary aged students attending a special school should follow the same year and length of day in school, as their peers in mainstream school and should not be required to appear different by attending school during June when their peers are on holidays.

The NCCA should also be requested to provide advice concerning access to appropriate certification for students with complex disabilities attending these special schools.

Recommendation 25

The DES should provide for the establishment of a new type of special school with rules and organisational structures appropriate to the profile and age of students with complex special educational needs enrolled.

5.5.8 Access to special schools and classes

At present, a student must have a formal assessment of disability, such as moderate general learning disabilities, to enrol in a special school or class. The NCSE considers that placement in special schools and classes should continue to be on the basis of a formal assessment of disability. Professional reports used for placement decisions should be based on an objective assessment of student needs.

The process of assessment should include a rigorous examination of the outcomes achieved to date as well as the interventions that were or could be put in place within available resources to support the student's inclusion in mainstream education before a decision on alternative placement in a special class or school setting is taken. In the case of post-primary schools, the student's experience in primary or special school should be taken into account. In the case of primary schools, the child's experience in a pre-school or early intervention setting should be taken into account.

If a special educational placement is considered appropriate, the professional reports should present options on how the student's needs are to be met, explain the available options and outline their implications.

Recommendation 26

26.1 The NCSE considers that placement in special schools and classes should continue for the present, pending the outcome of a national assessment model, to be based on a formal assessment of disability. Professional reports used for placement decisions should be based on an objective assessment of a student's overall needs. They should address the student's experience to date and the interventions that were or could be put in place to support his/her continued inclusion in mainstream education. Finally the report should explain the available placement options and outline their implications.

26.2 There should be an admissions committee for each special school and special class to make recommendations to the board of management concerning admission of students with special educational needs to such settings. NEPS and the NCSE should be represented on the admissions committee.

5.5.9 Allocation of teaching supports to special schools and classes

Special schools/classes are allocated teaching supports on the basis of very small class sizes (for example, from 11:1 in the case of mild GLD to 6:1 in the case of ASD) and the number of teachers allocated to the special school is determined by the profile of students' disability within each special school/class. The class sizes are based on the pupil-teacher appointment ratios for special schools and classes as recommended in the SERC report (DES, 1993:235).

The NCSE recommends that staffing arrangements for special schools and classes should continue to be based on these ratios as there was general agreement that staffing levels were adequate in these cases.

However, the NCSE recognises the considerable medical advances that have taken place since the publication of the SERC report in 1993 (DES, 1993). Some of these medical advances have brought about a situation where a small number of children survive premature births or serious illnesses but continue to have chronic needs that require ongoing medical intervention to ensure their survival. Some special schools catering for children with severe/profound general learning disabilities now have a small cohort of these children enrolled. The NCSE considers that their needs should be recognised through provision of an improved pupil-teacher ratio for one class group and access to appropriate nursing care.

The NCSE has previously recommended an improved pupil-teacher ratio for one class group in special schools and classes for severe EBD (NCSE, 2012).

Finally, the NCSE considers that special schools should be enabled and resourced to provide structured engagement between parents and schools. The home school community liaison scheme might provide one possibility of achieving this effectively. The home school liaison teacher could keep parents informed of the educational and behavioural

programmes implemented for their child in the school and on progress made. They could advise parents on parenting strategies to support the school's work with their child. They could similarly inform the school of any concerns that the parents/guardians may have concerning the student's education.

Recommendation 27

- 27.1 The NCSE recommends that the existing ratios should continue to provide the basis for the appointment of staff to special schools and classes.**
- 27.2 Special schools for severe/profound learning disabilities catering for students with chronic high dependency needs requiring ongoing medical intervention to survive, should be allowed to establish one class group on a PTR of 4:1 and the HSE should provide funding for access to a school nurse.**
- 27.3 The DES should enable special schools to provide structured engagement between parents and schools. The option of including special schools in the home school community liaison scheme should be explored as one way of achieving this on a cost neutral basis.**

The NCSE makes the following recommendation in relation to the allocation of teaching supports to special schools and classes which it considers will result in improvements and efficiencies in the allocation process.

Recommendation 28

- 28.1 The DES should, in consultation with the NCSE, issue the teaching staff arrangements for special schools on an annual basis, as happens for mainstream primary and post-primary schools and in accordance with prevailing policy parameters.**
- 28.2 Once allocated, the deployment of teaching and care staff in special schools/ classes should become the principal's responsibility. The principal should have sufficient flexibility to deploy the staff and assign students to classes in accordance with their learning needs which can change in the course of a year. This is in line with the Education Act, 1998 which states that schools are responsible for ensuring that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs are identified and provided for.**

Appendices



Appendix 1 – Setting the Scene: Historical and Current Context

Introduction

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is responsible for the development and determination of policy in relation to the education of children with special educational needs. Its policy development is informed by the findings of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report (DES, 1993), by national and international developments and by research findings.

Since 1998, DES policy development has been implemented by various legislative instruments which in turn have a direct bearing on education provision for children with special educational needs. These include: the Education Act, 1998; the National Disability Authority Act, 1999; the Equal Status Act, 2000; the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000; the Children Act, 2001; the Teaching Council Act, 2001; the Equality Act, 2004; the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004; and the Disability Act, 2005, each as amended.

International context for movement towards inclusion

Recent developments in legislation and policy have been driven by an international movement towards inclusivity in education for all children with special educational needs. The key policy documents underpinning this include:

- Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality (UNESCO, 1994). Ireland is one of 92 countries and 25 international organisations that calls on all governments to ‘give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve their education systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties; and to adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise’ (Article 3).
- Council of Europe Political Declaration: Improving the Quality of Life of People with Disabilities: Enhancing a Coherent Policy for and through Full Participation (Council of Europe, 2003). Member states (including Ireland) note that ‘education is a basic instrument of social integration and efforts should be made to give the opportunity to children with disabilities to attend a mainstream school, if it is in the interest of the child, to facilitate the transition from school or higher education to employment, and to develop the concept of life-long learning’ (para 22).
- Council of Europe Action Plan to Promote the Rights and Full Participation of People with Disabilities in Society: Improving the Quality of Life of People with Disabilities in Europe 2006-2015 (Council of Europe Recommendation, 2006). Member states (including Ireland) listed inclusivity in education as a key objective, stating that this should be, ‘to ensure that disabled people have the opportunity to seek a place in

mainstream education by encouraging relevant authorities to develop educational provision to meet the needs of their disabled populations’ (para 3.4.2(ii)).

- United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). Although not yet ratified by Ireland, the UNCRPD requires all states to ensure that persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in their communities; that reasonable accommodation of the individual’s requirements is provided; that persons with disabilities receive the support required within the general education system to facilitate their effective education; and that effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion (Article 24).
- World Health Organisation (WHO) World Report on Disability (2011). Most recently, the WHO specifically recommended that stakeholders ‘Focus on educating children as close to the mainstream as possible’; ‘Ensure an inclusive educational infrastructure – for example, by mandating minimum standards of environmental accessibility to enable access to school for children with disabilities’; and ‘Support teachers and schools to move away from a one-size-fits-all model towards flexible approaches that can cope with diverse needs of learners’ (page 226).

Historical context of special education in Ireland

An understanding of the unique historical context in which special education policy has evolved in Ireland, forms more than simply an interesting backdrop, but in fact explains the challenges faced in implementing effective special education provision today.

In the mid-nineteenth century educational provision was made for students with special educational needs for the first time, through the establishment of special schools for children with sensory impairment by religious orders. In 1918 these special schools were incorporated into the National School System. The State’s first official recognition of the special educational needs of ‘handicapped’ children was through the allocation of a more favourable pupil-teacher ratio in 1952.

The 1960s saw a significant growth in the number of special schools – rising to 20 – in 1964. In the 1970s special needs classes in primary schools were introduced in response to the Report of the Commission for Inquiry on Mental Handicap (DES, 1965a), which was followed by DES reports on: The Education of Children who are Handicapped by Impaired Hearing (DES, 1972), The Education of Physically Handicapped Children (DES, 1982) and The Education and Training of Severely and Profoundly Mentally Handicapped Children in Ireland (DES, 1983).

By 1993, 64 special schools existed in Ireland (DES, 1993). The contribution of the voluntary bodies, religious and lay, made this limited provision possible, but there remained a dearth of official policy on educational provision for students with special needs and the focus remained very much on primary provision, with secondary schools only providing ad hoc arrangements in response to parental demand. From a legal perspective, parents of these children were turning to the courts to seek to fill the gap in the legislative provision, with the cases of *O’Donoghue v Minister for Health & Ors* [1996] 2 I.R. and *Sinnott v*

Minister for Education & Ors [2001] 2 IR 545, being particularly of note. In *O'Donoghue*, the High Court found the State had a constitutional obligation under Article 42.4 of the Constitution to provide for free basic elementary education of all children including 'giving each child such advice, instruction and teaching as will enable him or her to make the best possible use of his or her inherent and potential capacities, physical, mental and moral, however limited these capacities may be'. In *Sinnott*, the Supreme Court subsequently ruled that the constitutional right to primary education applied only to children up to age 18.

A key turning point in policy development and ultimately the implementation of legislation regarding the education of children with special educational needs was the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993). This committee favoured 'as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary' (p22) and advocated the establishment of a continuum of educational provision to meet a continuum of special educational needs. The Report on the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996), the Report of the Task Force on Autism (DES, 2001) and the Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia (DES, 2001a) further informed the development of policy.

The Education Act, 1998 obliges the Minister for Education and Science (now the Minister for Education and Skills) to 'ensure, subject to the provisions of this Act, that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person' (section 7(1)(a)) (Government of Ireland, 1998).

Arising from a Government decision of October 1998 all children assessed as having special educational needs within the primary system were granted an automatic entitlement to special support services. This increased significantly the level of resource teaching and SNA supports with the education system.

This was followed by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 (EPSEN) (Government of Ireland, 2004). These key legislative provisions operate within a complementary framework emphasising the rights and equality of persons with disabilities as referenced in the Act's introduction. In particular the Disability Act, 2005 (Government of Ireland, 2005) provides for the assessment of health and education needs of persons with disabilities, and for appropriate provision to be made by Government to meet such needs, and creates a structure within which the equality and social inclusion of persons with disabilities can be achieved.

A National Council for Special Education was established by the Minister for Education and Science on December 24th, 2003, in accordance with section 54 of the Education Act. Its functions are set out under section 20 of the EPSEN Act, 2004 and include:

- Planning for, and co-ordinating provision of education for children with special educational needs and ensuring that a continuum of provision is available.
- Conducting and commissioning research.
- Advising the Minister for Education and Skills on policy in relation to special education.

- Disseminating information, including best practice, on special education to parents, schools and other interested persons.
- Consulting voluntary bodies to ensure their knowledge and expertise can inform development of policy by the NCSE.
- Reviewing generally the provision made for adults with disabilities to avail of further, higher and/or continuing education and advising educational institutions concerning best practice in the education of adults with a disability.

In addition the NCSE has specific functions regarding core provisions of the Act such as assessment and individual education plans but these sections have yet to be commenced.

Current policy

Definition of the term ‘special educational needs’

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 (EPSEN) defines ‘special educational needs’ as:

‘a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in, and benefit from, education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition and cognate words shall be construed accordingly.’ (Government of Ireland, 2004)

Prevalence of special educational needs in Ireland

In 2006, the NCSE estimated that up to 18 per cent of the schoolgoing population may have a special educational need, as defined under the EPSEN Act (NCSE, 2006). A more recent ESRI study (Banks & McCoy, 2011) using data from the longitudinal study *Growing Up in Ireland* (Williams et al, 2009) pointed to an overall prevalence rate of 25 per cent. The EPSEN Act definition of special educational needs was again used in the ESRI study and the data collected were based on reports of parents and teachers.

Inclusive education

The key message in the EPSEN Act, 2004 is that children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with children who have no such needs.

... a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with –

- (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or
- (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

(Government of Ireland, 2004)

The EPSEN Act goes on to clarify two exceptions to this commitment to educate all children in an inclusive environment. The first is where an assessment, carried out under the Act, finds this would not be in the child's best interests. The second is where this would not be in the interests of the other children with whom the child is to be educated.

Most children with special educational needs attend mainstream schools and are fully included in mainstream classes, with fewer than 1 per cent of students in Ireland attending a special school.

Continuum of provision

In Ireland, students with special educational needs are served by a continuum of provision ranging from full-time enrolment in mainstream classes to full-time enrolment in special schools, with a variety of options in-between. This means that a range of placement options is currently available to students with special educational needs, which include:

- A mainstream class, with additional support provided by:
 - The class teacher through differentiation of the curriculum, co-teaching with other staff as required; and
 - A resource/learning support teacher.
- A special class in a mainstream school.
- A special school designated by the Department of Education and Skills for a particular category or categories of disability.

Current provision: education supports

Early intervention

The State supports early intervention for children with special educational needs, through the provision of funding for several early childhood settings. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme allows eligible children to avail of a free pre-school place in the year before they start school. They can apply to avail of this scheme over a two-year period, with the number of hours and funding per child equating to those of a single school year. Parents can also apply for a waiver of the upper age limit on the basis that their child's special educational needs may delay their entry to primary school. A detailed guide to this programme and its procedures is available on the website of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (www.dcy.gov.ie).

For the school year 2011-12, the scheme cost €163 million and this is expected to rise to €175.8 million for 2012-13. Expected output for 2012 is the provision of free places for 67,000 children or 95 per cent of those eligible (Department of Children, 2012).

Children with special needs may also attend other State-funded early childhood settings for children with special educational needs. These include early intervention settings that are attached to Health Service Executive (HSE) funded service providers for children with disabilities and other private pre-school settings that are supported by HSE grant aid or HSE funded pre-school assistants.

The Department of Education and Skills provides for early intervention classes for children with autism from age three. Seventy-four such classes attached to mainstream schools are now funded by the Department (Source: DES, 2012).

The home tuition scheme provides a compensatory educational service for children:

- With a significant medical condition likely to cause major continuing disruption to school attendance.
- With special educational needs awaiting an educational placement, as an interim measure, including those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), aged three upwards who cannot access a place in an ASD setting including an early intervention class.
- Children aged two-and-a-half to three who have been assessed as having ASD based on the DSM IV or ICD 10 criteria.

The State aims over time to support a single early intervention setting structure (DES, 2012f). In the meantime, parents can access one or more of the previously mentioned early intervention settings, subject to eligibility and availability of service.

Overview of school-based supports for students with special needs

The supports put in place by the Department of Education and Skills for students with special needs in mainstream schools are described in the following sections. Their main features are:

- Every mainstream school is allocated class/subject teachers in line with specific pupil-teacher ratios at primary and post-primary levels. These posts are allocated to the school to enable them to educate all enrolled students.
- For the 2012-2013 school year, there were 9,950 Resource and Learning Support Teachers available to schools to provide supplementary learning support and resource teaching support to students with learning support and special educational needs, at an annual cost of approximately €600m.
- From this overall figure of 9,950, the NCSE had 5,265 resource teaching posts available to allocate to mainstream schools, on the basis of individual applications to support students assessed with a low incidence disability who had complex and enduring special educational needs and students with high incidence disabilities in post-primary schools. While the number of posts was a slight increase on 2011/2012, the overall demand for such posts had increased. This meant that a decision was taken by the Department of Education and Skills to adjust the basis for sanctioning resource teaching hours to schools (to 85 per cent) in order to ensure that the NCSE had capacity to respond to applications from schools.

Table 3: Teaching hours allocated per category of disability

Category	Hours per week
Physical disability	3
Emotional disturbance	3.5
Moderate GLD	3.5
Autism	5
Specific speech & language disorder	4
Hearing impairment	4
Severe emotional disturbance	5
Severe & profound GLD	5
Visual impairment	3.5
Multiple disabilities	5
Assessed syndrome	3 to 5 *

*depending on level of intellectual disability

Source: DES Circular 02/2005

Table 3 above provides details of low incidence categories along with weekly time allocation for each. For the 2012-13 school year, schools received 85 per cent of these qualifying hours for students in these categories.

- Class teacher allocations for special schools and classes are based on the pupil-teacher ratio specified for the particular category of disability of students enrolled. There are therefore much smaller class sizes in special schools and classes for students with special educational needs. Staffing ratios (including teacher and SNA ratios) are set out in Table 4.

Table 4: Staffing ratios for each disability category

Type of special class/school	Pupil-teacher ratio	Class-SNA ratio
Visual impairment	8 : 1	4 : 1
Hearing impaired	7 : 1	4 : 1
Profoundly Deaf	6 : 1	2 : 1
Mild GLD	11 : 1	4 : 1
Moderate GLD	8 : 1	2 : 1
Severe/profound GLD	6 : 1	1 : 2
Emotional disturbance	8 : 1	4 : 1
Severe emotional disturbance	6 : 1	1 : 1
Physical disability	10 : 1	1 : 1
Speech and Language Disorders	7 : 1	3 : 1
Specific learning disability	9 : 1	no automatic allocation
Autism/autistic spectrum disorder	6 : 1	1 : 2
Multiple disabilities	6 : 1	1 : 1

Source: SERC Report, 1993

The following additional supports are available to assist in the education of students with special educational needs:

- Assistive technology.
- Specialist equipment.
- Special school transport arrangements.
- School building adaptations where necessary.
- Enhanced levels of capitation grants for special schools and mainstream schools with special classes.
- Home tuition.
- Extended school year scheme (July provision) for students with ASD and severe/profound general learning disabilities.
- Visiting teacher service for Deaf/Hard of Hearing children and children who are Blind or have a Visual Impairment.
- SNA support for students with significant special care needs arising from a disability, where necessary.
- Early intervention classes for children with ASD.

Mainstream schools: Learning support and resource teaching for high incidence disabilities

Currently, a general allocation of additional teaching resources is provided to primary schools to support the inclusive education of the following categories of students: those with special educational needs arising from high incidence disabilities; those eligible for learning support teaching; and those with learning difficulties (DES, 2005). High incidence disabilities comprise borderline mild general learning disability, mild general learning disability and specific learning disability. Students whose achievement is at or below the tenth percentile on standardised tests of reading or mathematics are given priority when schools are determining eligibility for learning support teaching. Students with learning difficulties include those with mild speech and language difficulties, those with mild social or emotional difficulties and those with mild co-ordination or attention control difficulties (DES, 2005).

From the school year 2012-13 onwards, the general allocation model (GAM) described previously encompasses language support in a single allocation for all primary schools (DES, 2012a). Allocations under the GAM are based on the number of classroom teaching posts in each school in the previous school year, as outlined in primary circular 0007/2012 (*ibid*). Schools have autonomy in the deployment of resources between language support and learning support. It is not possible to identify the total number of students supported through the GAM as schools determine how these hours are used to support eligible students and the DES does not hold details of the number of students supported through this mechanism.

It was previously estimated, however, that about 13 per cent of the primary school population could be catered for under the GAM model which was broken down as follows:

- Approximately 10 per cent of the student population was estimated to be in need of additional learning support.
- The SERC report had estimated the prevalence of mild general learning difficulty to be 1.5 per cent.
- About 1 per cent of the school population was also estimated to have a borderline mild general learning difficulty.
- 0.5 per cent of the student population was estimated to have a specific learning difficulty (SLD).

(Source: Department of Education and Skills)

In terms of the total school population for 2011-12 (the latest school year for which figures are available on the DES website), this means of 509,040 primary students, over 66,175 students could potentially be supported through the GAM.

Post-primary schools are provided with a general allocation of learning support teaching hours to support eligible students. From the school year 2012-13 onwards, the combined resources available for learning support and language support were used to create a single allocation process (DES, 2012b). The new arrangements involve an allocation of 0.9 of a post for schools with an enrolment of fewer than 600 students and an allocation of 1.4 posts for schools with an enrolment of 600 or more students. Schools with significant concentrations of students requiring language support will receive additional resources.

Post-primary schools are also allocated additional resource teaching hours to support students with high incidence disabilities. The arrangements for the provision of resource teaching supports for post-primary schools for the 2012-13 school year are set out in the DES circular 0010/2012 (DES, 2012b). These arrangements are summarised below.

In May 2012, post-primary schools were given an allocation for high incidence resource teaching, equating to 95 per cent of the high incidence resource teaching allocation at end December 2011. This means there is no requirement for post-primary schools to have professional assessments conducted for entrants with high incidence needs. The remaining 5 per cent of resource teaching hours were retained for allocation to schools, including new schools that at that time (May 2012) had no such allocation for high incidence resource teaching (DES, 2012b).

Mainstream schools: Individual allocation of additional teaching support for low incidence disability

Additional teaching resources are allocated to primary and post-primary schools for the support of individual students with complex and enduring special educational needs and who have been assessed as having a low incidence disability. The number of hours allocated varies by category of disability.

Staffing arrangements for primary schools for the 2012-13 school year are set out in primary circular 0007/2012 (DES, 2012a). Over 1,700 primary schools throughout the country were identified as base schools for 2,500 full-time resource only posts, which were to be allocated on a permanent basis (ibid). Teachers in these full-time permanent

posts can undertake the NCSE approved resource hours for students with low incidence special needs, either in the base schools themselves or in neighbouring schools.

The NCSE also allocates additional resource teaching hours to post-primary to support students with low incidence disabilities.

Additional teaching support for low incidence disability sanctioned by the NCSE 2012-13

In the school year 2012-13, additional teacher resources were allocated to schools for 21,421 primary and 9,781 post-primary students (31,202 students) with low incidence special needs (Source: NCSE, 2012). These figures do not include those with learning support or high incidence special educational needs as these students are allocated additional resources through a different model, as previously described. It should be noted that this is the first year that this total figure does not include the number of students with high incidence disabilities in post-primary schools.

Table 5: Approximate number of students for whom resource teaching hours (RTHs) were allocated to schools for low incidence disabilities for the academic year 2012-13

Category	Primary (n)	Post-primary (n)	Total (n)
Assessed syndrome	217	63	280
Autism	4487	2052	6539
EBD	4143	2643	6786
Hearing impairment	693	417	1110
Moderate GLD	524	209	733
Multiple disabilities	1890	675	2565
Physical disability	3345	2190	5535
Severe EBD	862	398	1260
Severe & profound GLD	34	7	41
Specific speech and language disorder	4932	912	5844
Visual impairment	294	215	509
Total	21,421	9,781	31,202

Source: NCSE SEAS November 2012

Please note that these figures were compiled at a point in time in November 2012 and can fluctuate over the course of a school year.

Special classes attached to mainstream schools

Students with special needs may be enrolled in special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools for students with special educational needs arising from a disability. These classes have a more favourable pupil-teacher ratio to assist the school in meeting the educational needs of students placed in these classes. In addition, special classes may be given a baseline level of SNA support to reflect the profile of care needs in the class. The staffing ratios for each disability category is included in Table 4 above.

For the 2012/2013 school year there were a total of 628 classes attached to mainstream schools, with 495 special classes attached to mainstream primary schools and a further

133 special classes attached to mainstream post-primary schools. Details of the number of classes approved under each disability category are included below (Source: NCSE, 2012). A full list of the classes approved may be accessed on the NCSE website at: www.ncse.ie.

Table 6: No of special classes for each disability category 2012–13

Type of special class	Primary classes	Post-primary classes	Enrolment
Hearing impaired	11	5	89
Mild GLD	60	11	686
Moderate GLD	12	16	136
Severe & profound GLD	10	0	28
EBD	5	1	34
Severe EBD	1	0	5
Physical disability	0	1	8
Specific speech and language disorders	64	0	434
Specific learning disability	13	0	123
Autism/ASD	316	97	2112
Multiple disabilities	3	2	23
Total	495	133	3,678

Source: NCSE, December 2012

Special schools for students with special educational needs

Ireland has 119 special schools for students with special educational needs arising from a disability (Source: NCSE, 2012). NCSE figures show approximately 7,094 students were attending special schools for students with disabilities during the 2012-13 school year. There were 1,078 teaching posts supporting these students and over 2,100 SNA posts.

Class teachers are allocated to special schools on a pupil-teacher ratio basis, according to the profile of students with special educational needs enrolled (NCSE circular 03/2010; DES circular 38/2010). There is a standard staffing schedule specified for special classes/schools as set out in Table 4. In applying these ratios in special schools a degree of flexibility is available to meet the needs of those with complex needs.

Table 7 below provides a breakdown of the 119 special schools in terms of designated category of disability, number of students enrolled and teaching supports provided. While a special school may be officially designated for a particular category of disability, in most cases it will also cater for children with complex needs within other disability categories.

Table 7: Designation of special schools

Official Designation	Number of schools	Number of students	Teachers*
Physical disability	6	288	47.5
Hearing impairment	3	120	51
Visual impairment	1	40	7
EBD	12 **	373***	62
Mild GLD	30	2831	336.5
Moderate GLD	33	2255	377
Severe & profound GLD	10	312	62
Autism	19	507	89
Specific learning disability	4	296	33
Multiple disabilities	1	72	13
Total	119	7094	1078

Source: NCSE November 2012

* This column refers to class teachers only; it does not take into account principal and ex quota posts

** One of these schools caters for students with mild EBD, the remaining eleven cater for students with severe EBD

*** A substantial number of these students have been assessed as having an autistic spectrum disorder

Information on the breakdown of special schools across each county is included in Table 19.

Care supports for students with a significant special care need arising from a disability

Special needs assistants (SNAs) are allocated to primary, post-primary and special schools to assist schools in addressing additional care needs so as to facilitate inclusion of students with special educational needs. Schools may apply for an SNA post for a pupil with a disability who also has a significant medical need for such assistance, a significant impairment of physical or sensory function or whose behaviour is a danger to themselves or to other students or seriously interferes with the learning opportunities of other students (DES, 2005).

A professional must assess and describe the student's additional care needs and must also state why SNA support is necessary along with outlining the benefits to the child from receiving such care in the school setting. The duties of SNAs are solely related to care needs and are strictly of a non-teaching nature (DES, 2002).

SENOs examine each request in the context of Department of Education and Skills' policy and the care supports already provided. The SENO decides if the school is eligible for additional support on the basis of the student's care profile and, if so, whether it has sufficient SNA resources in place to meet the student's care needs. It is important to maintain a balance between allocation of necessary care support and the student's right to acquire personal independence skills. Where the student is eligible for additional care support and the school has an insufficient number of SNAs to provide it, the SENO may sanction additional SNA staffing. Schools are advised to regularly review students' care needs and the level and type of support they receive.

Some students have major care needs and may require full-time SNA assistance. Others require assistance intermittently so their needs can be met as they arise.

In November 2012, approximately 8,300 students in mainstream primary and 2,900 students in mainstream post-primary classes had access to additional care support. Children in special classes attached to mainstream schools also had access to care support. In addition approximately 2,100 whole time equivalent SNAs were approved in special schools catering for 7,094 children with special needs.

Assistive technology

Assistive technology refers to any item of equipment that can be used to improve the functional capability of a student with special educational needs and is of direct educational benefit to them. Schools are grant aided by the DES to purchase the type of equipment essential for this cohort to access the curriculum (DES, 2013a).

Assistive technology was provided to a total of 4,766 students with special educational needs in the school year 2012-13 (see Table 8 below for a breakdown of these figures by disability category).

The cost of providing assistive technology is estimated to be in the region of €1.26 million for the 2012-13 school year.

(Source: Department of Education and Skills, 2012)

Table 8: Numbers of new applications approved for assistive technology (AT) for academic year 2012-13 by disability category

Academic year: 2012-13	Primary No of students	Post-primary No of students	Special No of students	Sum
Assessed syndrome	53	14	9	76
Autism/ASD	247	220	32	499
Borderline mild GLD	10	23	0	33
EBD	55	77	1	133
Hearing impairment	838	163	12	1013
Mild GLD	16	26	15	57
Moderate GLD	60	16	20	96
Multiple disabilities	488	158	93	739
Physical disability	446	681	21	1148
Severe EBD	17	10	4	31
Severe & profound GLD	14	0	45	59
Specific learning disability	210	260	15	485
Specific speech & language disorder	81	43	0	124
Visual impairment	175	89	9	273
Total	2710	1780	276	4766

Source: Special Education Administrative System, NCSE, November 2012.

Specialist equipment

Grant aid is available to all schools to fund the purchase of special items of furniture and equipment for educational purposes for students with diagnosed special educational needs. Schools must apply directly to the DES with an accompanying report from a professional who assessed the student. Only furniture/equipment approved by the DES will be funded.

Where the NCSE approves a new special class, a €6,500 grant per class is available for teaching aids and classroom equipment. A once-off grant of €7,000 is also available to provide multi-sensory equipment for newly established multi-sensory rooms.

As of November 2012, just under €2.1 million was approved for specialist equipment in primary (€1.775m) and post-primary (€0.321m) schools during 2012.

(Source: Department of Education and Skills, December 2012)

Enhanced capitation grants

Capitation grants are paid towards the day-to-day running costs of schools, for example heating, cleaning, lighting, maintenance of premises and grounds and provision of teaching materials and resources. The rate of payment for a student in a mainstream class in a primary school for the 2012-13 school year is €176 per student while the post-primary rate is €306 per student in a mainstream class (DES, 2013b).

Enhanced payments are made for all students attending special schools and special classes in mainstream primary schools. The rates vary, depending on the particular category of special educational need involved, as set out in Table 9 below.

In post-primary schools, an enhanced capitation grant of €191 is paid for students with special educational needs enrolled in special classes.

The following table outlines the amount of capitation paid by the Department of Education and Skills for students attending special classes in mainstream primary schools or attending special schools.

Table 9: Primary school capitation rates 2012

Category	01/09/2012 Under 12	01/09/2012 Over 12
Mainstream rate	176	176
Visual impairment	849	849
Hearing impairment	849	849
Profoundly deaf	871	871
Mild GLD (mainstream school)	452	673
Mild GLD (special school)	563	849
Moderate GLD	849	849
Severe & profound GLD	871	871
Specific learning disability (mainstream school)	452	673
Specific learning disability (special school)	563	849
EBD	849	849
Severe EBD	871	871
Physical disability	849	849
Autism / ASD	871	871
Specific speech & language disorder	849	849
Multiple disabilities	871	871
Traveller children	249	249
Out of control	871	871

Source: DES, 2012

Table 10 shows the capitation expenditure for students with special educational needs in primary and post-primary schools during 2010-12.

Table 10: Capitation expenditure

	Primary	Post-primary
2010	€8,174,761	€1,533,763
2011	€8,133,251	€1,384,546
2012	€7,892,703	€1,400,000 (allocation)

Source: Answer to Parliamentary Question, October 2012

Special transport scheme

The purpose of the special transport scheme is to support the transport to and from school of students with special educational needs taking account of available resources. Students are eligible where they:

- Have special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability, in accordance with the designation of high and low incidence disability set out in the Department of Education and Skills circular 02/05.

- Are attending the nearest available recognised mainstream school, special class or special school or unit that is or can be resourced to meet their special educational needs.

Eligibility is determined following consultation with the NCSE through its network of SENOs. Details of the special transport scheme are set out in the Department of Education and Skills circular, School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Needs (DES, 2011d), available at www.education.ie.

During the 2012-13 school year, the DES provided transport to 6,531 students with special needs (see Table 11 for a breakdown of these figures across the disability categories).

Table 11: Number of students receiving transport support for academic year 2012–13

Academic year: 2012-13	Primary No of students	Special No of students	Post-primary No of students	Total
Assessed syndrome	18	58	24	100
Autism / ASD	1248	687	341	2276
EBD	26	115	14	155
Severe EBD	11	90	5	106
Hearing impairment	53	98	26	177
Borderline mild GLD	12	97	6	115
Mild GLD	96	902	48	1046
Moderate GLD	47	588	59	694
Multiple disabilities	134	408	53	595
Physical disability	79	158	110	347
Severe & profound GLD	22	228	1	251
Specific learning disability	73	93	1	167
Specific speech and language disorder	422	15	5	442
Visual impairment	7	26	27	60
	2248	3563	720	6531

Source: Special Education Administrative System, NCSE, November 2012

The average cost of providing school transport is €1,020 at primary level, €958 at post-primary level and €9,087 for students with special needs. The scheme's overall annual cost is approximately €169 million and it is estimated that about 34 per cent of the budget (€58 million) is spent on special needs transport supporting 8,000 children. (Source: DES Transport Section, 2012).

Special needs accommodation

It is general practice to include a special needs unit in the accommodation brief for new school buildings, unless local circumstances indicate it will not be required. Where new schools are provided in a green-field site situation, accommodation level is specified for primary and post-primary schools as set out in Table 12 below.

Schools may also avail of grant aid to reconfigure existing accommodation to provide a special class or special needs unit. The extent of accommodation provided can be informed by the configuration of the building and site conditions.

It is not possible to provide details of grant expenditure on special needs accommodation over the last number of years as this area forms part of the overall schedule of accommodation for a school building project and the Department does not isolate the cost of this element.

Table 12: Accommodation suites for primary and post-primary schools

	Name	Primary area m ²	Post-primary
1	Central activities space	80.00	80.00
2	Class Base 1 (excluding toilets and storage)	70.00	70.00
3	Class Base 2 (excluding toilets and storage)	70.00	70.00
4	En-suite toilets & shower area	30.00	*30.00
5	Withdrawal room associated with Class Base 1	12.00	12.00
6	Withdrawal room associated with Class Base 2	12.00	12.00
7	Multi-sensory room	20.00	20.00
8	Para-educational room	15.00	15.00
9	Staff toilets	10.00	10.00
10	Linen/slucie room	10.00	10.00
11	Storage	30.00	30.00
12	Office	20.00	20.00
13	Practical activity room		50.00
14	Daily living skills		16.50
13	Sub-total	379.00	445.50
14	Internal Walls & partitions @ 6%	22.74	26.73
15	Circulation @ 18%	68.22	80.19
16	Total	469.96	552.42
17	Total (rounded up)	470.00	552.00

Source: Department of Education and Skills Building Unit November 2012

Minor works grant

The Department of Education and Skills previously provided funding for a devolved grant scheme for minor works to national school properties. The last grant paid out to schools under this scheme was made in November 2011 for the school year 2011-12 for €28 million (Source: DES, 2012).

Under the minor works scheme, funding was made available to all recognised primary schools on the following basis:

- Basic grant: €5,500.
- Each mainstream student enrolled: €18.50.
- Each student with special educational needs attending a special school/class: €74.

Under the scheme, any funding granted had to be spent on the physical infrastructure of the school or on items of furniture and equipment for educational use, including IT related equipment. Works covered included:

- Improvements to school buildings and grounds (included replacement of windows, roof repairs, resurfacing of school yard, repainting and re-decorating, improving insulation standards and improving access for all).
- Improvement or replacement of mechanical and electrical services.
- Purchase of standard furniture and physical education equipment.
- Purchase of floor coverings and window blinds.
- Purchase of IT-related equipment (items such as computers, printers, overhead projectors and photocopiers).

There was no requirement for schools to apply directly to the Department for approval to carry out works or to purchase items covered by the scheme.

The DES has decided that in the current economic circumstances, its priority is to focus capital allocation on major school projects and smaller projects devolved to schools to meet demographic demand.

Emergency works scheme

The main purpose of the emergency works scheme is to ensure the availability of funding for urgent works to schools in need of resources because of an emergency situation or on receipt of an enrolment application from a student with special educational needs. It is solely for unforeseen emergencies and to provide funding to facilitate inclusion and access for students with special educational needs.

(Source: DES, 2012).

Summer works scheme

The purpose of the summer works scheme is to devolve funding to individual school authorities to undertake small-scale building works which, ideally, can be carried out during the summer months or at other times to avoid disrupting the operation of the school. The scheme is open to primary and post-primary schools with permanent recognition and in non-rented accommodation.

It covers necessary and immediate small-scale works to improve the integrity of buildings and their external environment. It also covers projects to facilitate inclusion and access for students or staff members with special needs.

The main focus of the school building programme for the foreseeable future is on meeting demographic needs and ensuring that a child has access to a physical school place. To prioritise available funding for provision of essential school accommodation, the Minister has announced that it is not possible to continue a summer works programme at the present time.

(Source: Written Dáil Answers, January 30th, 2013).

Ancillary services (secretary/caretaker)

The purpose of the ancillary services grant is to assist schools to provide secretarial and/or caretaking assistance. The level and extent of services provided is a matter for the school authorities who, through the discretion afforded by the scheme, apply diverse arrangements for secretarial and caretaking services as resources permit. Special schools are paid the ancillary services grant based on the number of authorised teaching staff approved by the Department for the school as outlined below. The maximum grant is paid based on a ceiling of 16 teachers.

Table 13: Maximum grant for ancillary services

No of teachers	Full grant	Half grant
1	€11,220.00	€5,610.00
2	€11,594.00	€5,797.00
3	€17,952.00	€8,976.00
4	€24,310.00	€12,155.00
5	€30,668.00	€15,334.00
6	€36,839.00	€18,419.50
7	€42,636.00	€21,318.00
8	€48,246.00	€24,123.00
9	€50,864.00	€25,432.00
10	€57,035.00	€28,517.50
11	€63,206.00	€31,603.00
12	€69,377.00	€34,688.50
13	€75,548.00	€37,774.00
14	€81,719.00	€40,859.50
15	€87,890.00	€43,945.00
16	€93,500.00	€46,750.00

Source: DES, 2012

Home tuition scheme

Home tuition is intended to provide a compensatory educational service to students in the following categories:

- Students with a significant medical condition likely to cause major disruption to their attendance at school on a continuing basis – home tuition in this category is to be provided for students who:
 - cannot attend school at all;
 - are absent for a significant proportion of the school year and where the degree of absence is such that without supplementary instruction s/he is unlikely to be able to perform academically at the level appropriate to his/her level of ability.
- Children with special educational needs awaiting an appropriate educational placement, as an interim measure, including children with an autism spectrum disorder

(ASD), aged three upwards who cannot access a place in an ASD setting including an early intervention class.

- Children aged two-and-a-half to three (who have been assessed as having an autistic spectrum disorder based on the DSM IV or ICD 10 criteria).

(DES, 2012f)

In the 2011-12 school year 545 applications were approved for children with special educational needs, where no school placement was available (most of these applications were for children with autism of a pre-school age).

The cost of the home tuition scheme for 2012 was €9.5m million.

(Source: Written Dáil Answers, January 30th, 2013).

Extended school year scheme

The DES provides funding for an extended school year for students with a severe or profound general learning disability or with autism. This includes children with ASD in special schools, special classes and, since 2005, all children with ASD who receive additional low incidence hours in mainstream schools. The extended year is more commonly known as July provision. Where school-based provision is not feasible, home-based provision may be grant aided.

In July 2012, 2,521 students availed of the school-based programme in 151 schools while 3,037 availed of home-based July tuition (total: 5,558 students). The programme's estimated cost in 2012 is €10.5 million. It has been previously estimated that this would rise to about €64 million were all children with special educational needs to be included in the scheme.

(Source: Department of Education and Skills, November 2012)

Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Exams (RACE)

The State Examinations Commission grants reasonable accommodations to candidates with permanent or long-term conditions, including visual and hearing difficulties, or specific learning difficulties, which will significantly impair their performance in State examinations. Students may apply for a reasonable accommodation(s) in this instance.

Reasonable accommodations are intended to:

- Remove, as far as possible, the impact of the disability on the candidate's performance and thus enable the candidate to demonstrate his or her level of attainment.
- Ensure that, whilst giving candidates every opportunity to demonstrate their level of attainment, the special arrangements will not give the candidate an unfair advantage over other candidates in the same examination.

An expert advisory group on examinations has published a framework of principles to guide the RACE scheme available at www.examinations.ie. The website also details the range of reasonable accommodations available and how applications are made.

Table 14 below outlines the number of special centres approved for the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations from 2010-12, with associated costs.

Table 14: Reasonable accommodation in certificate exams

	2010	2011	2012
Special centres approved	8474	8860	9782
Cost	€5.6m	€6.3m	Not available at time of writing

Source: State Examination Commission, November 2012

In 2012, 7,435 students availed of reasonable accommodations at Junior Cert level, while 7,198 availed of this at Leaving Cert level (SEC, 2012).

A special examination centre does not necessarily mean a student will be sitting the examination alone. In some circumstances it may be appropriate for students granted access to these centres to be accommodated with a few students similarly provided for under RACE. In the case of special centres, the appointment of superintendents is delegated to schools as they are best placed to meet the specific needs of these individual candidates.

Services of the Department of Education and Skills that support students with special educational needs

Students with special educational needs may require a broad spectrum of educational services to be in place in order for their educational needs to be met. Within the DES, several sections focus on supporting schools in their work with this group of students by developing whole school approaches to the identification and assessment of need; formulation, implementation and monitoring of appropriate interventions; promotion of positive behaviours and management of challenging behaviours and providing ongoing advice and continuous professional development for teachers and parents.

The work of these services was regarded by groups consulted as very valuable in helping to include students with special educational needs in education. The services are described in the following pages.

Visiting teacher service

The visiting teacher service provides a service to Deaf/Hard of Hearing students and students who are Blind/Visually Impaired from the time of referral through to third level education. Visiting teachers are qualified teachers, the majority of whom hold postgraduate qualifications. They advise and support parents and schools and play a key role in facilitating inclusion of students in mainstream settings.

Each visiting teacher is allocated a caseload of children within a specified region. They visit the young children in their homes when they are at a pre-school age and/or at school when they are enrolled. They model appropriate teaching approaches for parents and teachers and advise them on how to manage their child's special educational needs. They also advise on the provision of assistive technology. When the child is enrolled, the school can apply for additional resource teaching hours to cater for the needs of the student if the sensory impairment is significant.

Currently, there are 47 whole-time equivalent teacher posts within the visiting teacher service to support approximately 2,700 children with sensory impairments throughout the country.

(Source: DES, 2012)

The service provided by the visiting teachers includes:

- Guidance and support and specialist teaching to pre-school children and their parents in the home.
- Specialist teaching, support and monitoring in schools.
- Advice to parents and teachers on curricular and environmental implications, including the use of assistive technology.
- Liaising with parents, teachers and other professionals.

Advising the State Examination Commission on applications for reasonable accommodation in State exams.

Providing a transition report for students in final year post-primary education to advise disability and access officers for appropriate accommodations and supports at third level. The visiting teacher may provide additional support if necessary during a student's first year in college.

National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

The NEPS is a division of the Department of Education and Skills. Its mission is:

'... to support the personal, social and educational development of all children through the application of psychological theory and practice in education.'¹³

The NEPS currently employs 167 whole time equivalent psychologists and has sanction to employ a further 6 whole time equivalents to bring the total number of psychologists to 173 whole time equivalents (DES, 2013). Schools without an assigned NEPS psychologist have access to the Department of Education and Skills Scheme for commissioning psychological assessments

The NEPS model of service embodies consultation as an overarching framework and as a process for service delivery to schools. In addressing the developmental needs of all children in education, NEPS psychologists aim to offer schools a balance between individual casework and support and development initiatives designed to promote inclusion and teacher/school effectiveness. NEPS psychologists have a list of assigned schools generally comprising several post-primary schools and their feeder primary schools. Schools have a guideline allocation of time. An annual planning and review process with each is an essential element of maximising the service. During the planning and review process the school and the NEPS psychologist explore jointly the needs of individual students, groups of students and the school. They then agree a plan incorporating individual and systemic approaches to meeting the identified needs.

13 See NEPS website at: <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Management-Organisation/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-.html>

The NEPS has produced the following publications for schools:

- *Special Educational Needs – A Continuum of Support Guidelines and Resource Pack for Teachers* (DES, 2007a, 2007b)
- *Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties – A Continuum of Support* (DES, 2010a) which addresses learning and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties
- *A Continuum of Support for Post-primary Schools – Guidelines and Resource Pack for Teachers* (DES, 2010 b, 2010c).

These documents set out three levels of support which reflect the developmental stage of the students and complexity of the post-primary school system:

- Classroom support/support for all encompasses effective preventive, teaching and screening processes.
- School support/support for some and
- School support plus/support for a few encompass solution focused assessment and intervention planning for students with known or emerging needs and those with more complex or enduring needs.

The NEPS Continuum of Support

NEPS psychologists encourage schools to use a dynamic, graduated problem solving process of information gathering, assessment, intervention and review when identifying and responding to students with special educational needs. As stated above, the three levels of support and intervention for individual students are referred to as classroom support (support for all), school support (support for some) and school support plus (support for a few). Each level encompasses a collaborative, problem-solving process founded on evidence-based whole school and classroom practices. NEPS psychologists have a role in developing school capacity to meet student needs at each level. They can support schools in developing whole school and classroom approaches as well as strategies suited to individual students and classes/groups of students.

- **Classroom support/support for all level:** describes a process of prevention, early identification and effective mainstream teaching. These systems are available to all students and effectively meet the needs of most. The classroom teacher is responsible for the progress of all students in the classroom. NEPS psychologists will normally provide indirect support for students through the provision of a consultation service to class teachers with concerns about a student's progress. A consultation with a class teacher involves collaborative exploration of a professional concern and development of responses, followed up by a review of the effectiveness of those responses. In this way the psychologist will be helping the teacher to develop or refine classroom support plans or their overall classroom practices without being directly involved in casework.
- **School support/support for some:** this level is an assessment and intervention process directed at some students, or groups of students, who require additional input. NEPS psychologists will normally be indirectly involved with the student; however the problem-solving process will usually involve consultation with the class teacher and

school support staff. In cases at this level involving substantial assessment by teachers, classroom observation by the psychologist and intervention planning, a formal request for support is made. Consent is sought from parents who will also be involved in the problem-solving process. Throughout the consultation process, the psychologist will support and facilitate teachers and parents to develop a school support plan to address any additional learning needs and/or behavioural, emotional and social concerns, which will then be reviewed over time.

- **School support plus/support for a few:** this level is generally characterised by more intensive and individualised support. A few students will have more severe or complex difficulties requiring the direct involvement of the educational psychologist. NEPS psychologists will normally be directly involved in assessing student needs, using a range of assessment methods to take account of student and contextual contributory factors. They also identify strengths and resources within the student, family and school which can be employed to support the student in developing skills to overcome their difficulties and to maximise their educational experiences. Throughout the consultation process the psychologist will work with the student (in an age appropriate way), their parents and teachers to develop and oversee a school support plus plan, identifying priority needs and interventions to address them. Where the student is already involved with other services, such as clinical psychology, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), or speech and language therapy, the psychologist will normally request information from these professionals, or their involvement in the school support plus process.

In some cases, NEPS psychologists may provide short-term individual or group therapeutic interventions. Given staffing constraints, however, they are in a position only to provide individual therapeutic interventions in an extremely limited number of cases and most psychologists are not in a position to provide such intervention (DES, 2012).

In addition, they are involved in development and delivery of staff inputs and interventions in several areas, such as Friends for Life, and the Incredible Years programme, in collaboration with local clinical psychologists, child and adolescent mental health teams and other service providers.

National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS)

The NBSS was established by the Department of Education and Skills in 2006 in response to the recommendation in *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools* (2006). The NBSS promotes and supports positive behaviour through the provision of a systematic continuum of support to school communities. The service assists partner post-primary schools in addressing behavioural concerns on three levels:

- Level 1: Whole School Support
- Level 2: Targeted Intervention Support
- Level 3: Intensive, Individualised Support

This three-tiered approach, founded on international best practice, is applied to behavioural interventions and endeavours to address the behavioural, social and emotional, academic literacy and learning and positive health and well-being needs of students in partner schools. These three levels of support are customised to the specific requirements of each partner school on an ongoing basis and focus on developing:

- behaviour for learning skills
- social and emotional literacy skills
- academic literacy, learning and study skills
- positive health and well-being skills.

At Level 3, a further support is available to those partner schools with a high intake of students who continue to experience difficulty and demonstrate challenging behaviours despite support received with their peers at Whole School Level 1 and targeted interventions at Level 2. In the academic year 2012-13, 22 schools were providing Behaviour Support Classroom (BSC) support to students requiring a Level 3 intensive, individualised intervention and 28 were providing Behaviour for Learning Programme Teacher (BfL) support to targeted students in their schools. Schools with BSC and BfL interventions are supported in their work by NBSS speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. All other partner schools are supported at Level 3 by direct work between students, teachers, parents and NBSS team members (Source: NBSS, 2012).

Continuing professional development for teachers

Teacher Education Section (TES)

The TES section of the Department of Education and Skills, is responsible for supporting the development of a comprehensive national approach to the professional development of teachers. The remit of the section includes programmes delivered by the colleges of education, the education departments within colleges and universities and courses delivered via the Special Education Support Service.

Combined post-graduate diploma for teachers involved in learning support and special education

These post-graduate programmes, funded by the DES, provide up to 295 places annually across seven different third level colleges/universities. They aim to provide substantial theoretical and practical continuing professional development for teachers working with students with special educational needs and those requiring learning support.

The programmes extend over one academic year with eight weeks' release from schools/centres for attendance at the relevant programme venue. The remainder of the year involves teaching and supervised teaching practice in the participants' own educational settings (DES, 2012d).

The estimated cost for 2012 is €823,641. In addition, this funding includes costs for:

- Provision of up to 18 places at the Graduate Certificate in the Education of Students with ASDS at St Patrick's College Drumcondra

- Provision of up to 125 places for SNAs on the certificate course available at St Angela's College, Mary Immaculate College and Church of Ireland College of Education.
- Provision of up to 25 places on an induction course for teachers of students with severe and profound difficulties, available at St Patrick's College.

Source: DES, 2012

Special Educational Support Service (SESS)

The SESS is a national support service established in 2003 to enhance the quality of learning and teaching for students with special educational needs through consolidating, co-ordinating, developing and delivering a range of continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives and support for school personnel working with students with special educational needs in a variety of educational settings. These settings include mainstream primary and post-primary schools, special schools and special classes.

The aims of the SESS are

- To enhance the quality of teaching and learning through provision of professional development and support for personnel working with students with special educational needs in a variety of settings-mainstream primary and post-primary, special schools and special classes.
- To design and deliver a range of professional development initiatives and supports for school personnel.
- To consolidate and co-ordinate existing professional development and support.

The SESS is staffed by a team of 18 full-time professional staff who are seconded on a yearly basis from their teaching positions to the management committee of Cork Education Support Centre (CESC) which acts as host centre for SESS. The full-time staff are assisted by a part-time team of 46 associates and 24 local facilitators.

Source: DES, 2012

Models of support provided by SESS

The SESS provides a continuum of support to teachers working with students with special educational needs using a variety of models, such as the SESS support scheme, online professional development and support, school visits, the production of resource materials and DVDs, SESS-designed courses, dialogue with teachers etc. The SESS uses teams of co-ordinators, advisors, associates and local facilitators to deliver these programmes.

Schools and individual teachers also identify their own professional development needs and can access support in all areas of special education through the SESS supports scheme. This support can be financial, professional and/or advisory in nature. Some funding is also made available annually, through the support scheme, for teachers pursuing post-graduate programmes in areas such as applied behaviour analysis (ABA), or teaching pupils who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing or pupils who have a visual impairment.

Professional development provided by SESS covers a range of specialities, including:

- assessment and individual educational planning

- assistive technology
- autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs)
- applied behaviour analysis (ABA)
- challenging behaviour
- communication and language
- Down syndrome
- exceptionally able
- general learning disabilities
- physical disability
- special educational needs and ICT
- sensory impairment
- specific learning disabilities
- transition

The SESS provided over 20,080 CPD places to teachers of special educational needs students in 2012. (Source: DES, 2012)

Table 15: Breakdown of approved funding for SESS for 2010-12

	2010	2011	2012
Approved funding	€2,046,363	€2,481,959	€2,078,297

Source: DES 2012

Table 16: Breakdown of funding for SESS – 2012

Autism budget	€699,375
General budget	€1,140,576
Behaviour budget	€238,346
Total	€2,078,297

Source: DES 2012

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

DEIS, the action plan for educational inclusion, focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education. It provides for a standardised system of identifying levels of disadvantage and an integrated school support programme (SSP). It represents a shift in emphasis away from individual initiatives, each addressing a particular aspect of the problem, with DEIS adopting a multi-faceted and more integrated approach.

The scheme provides for:

- A standardised system for identifying and regularly reviewing levels of disadvantage in schools.
- A new integrated school support programme to tackle disadvantage which brings together and builds upon pre-existing schemes and programmes, including the

school completion programme, the home school community liaison scheme and Breaking the Cycle.

Table 17 presents a breakdown of the schools included in the DEIS scheme.

Table 17: Schools included in the DEIS scheme

	Band 1	Band 2	Total
Urban primary	197	144	341
Rural primary	-	-	324
Post-primary	-	-	195
Overall total	197	144	860

Source: Department of Education and Skills 2012

Designated disadvantage status attracts increased resources from the Department of Education and Skills, both in terms of reduced pupil-teacher ratios and in terms of the allocation of permanent teachers under the general allocation model (GAM). The GAM is the principal mechanism by which primary schools are supported to include students with high incidence special educational needs.

DEIS Band 1 schools comprise 197 urban/town primary schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage (Source: DES, 2012). From September 2012, the staffing schedule for these schools has been based on a general average of one teacher for every 22 students. These schools will also be given an additional allocation of 0.2 of a post where the school has fewer than 200 students and 0.4 of a post where the school has 200 or more students. DEIS Band 1 schools will also do better than other primary schools with the general allocation model. This is because the applicable staffing schedule provides a more favourable position for them in number of classroom teaching posts, on which the GAM is now based.

A total of 195 DEIS post-primary schools exist which are provided with additional support through an improved staffing schedule of 18.25:1. This is an 0.75 point improvement compared to the existing standard 19:1 that generally applies in post-primary schools that do not charge fees (Source: DES, 2012b).

The home school community liaison scheme was established in 1990 and is now part of the new, integrated school support programme, provided as part of the DEIS scheme. It works on the basis of a preventative strategy and is 'concerned with establishing partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of children's learning'.¹⁴ It focuses on the adult(s) in the children's lives and aims to derive indirect benefit for the children concerned. Schools within the scheme are allocated one teacher to work across the school, home and community.

14 <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=17216&ecategory=34291&language=EN>

State agencies

National Council for Special Education

The NCSE has a range of functions in relation to supporting students with special educational needs. Its local service is provided through the network of special educational needs organisers (SENOs). Currently, the NCSE employs 73 SENOs and nine senior SENOs. Each has responsibility for specific primary, post-primary and special schools within their area. SENOs provide a service to all primary, post-primary and special schools in the country.

SENOs can inform parents of educational options for students with special educational needs. They sanction resource teaching hours and SNA posts and process applications for assistive technology and transport. SENOs are also involved in strategic local planning in consultation with stakeholders. They advise the Department of Education and Skills on local needs for students with special educational needs.

The SENO, on behalf of the NCSE, liaises with local health authorities to co-ordinate the delivery of services between the health and education sectors. In this way, they facilitate the inclusion of the child in the school system.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

The NCCA is a statutory body with responsibility to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment matters relating to early childhood education and primary and post-primary schools. The NCCA has published guidelines for teachers of students with general learning disabilities (NCCA, 2007a),¹⁵ which support teachers at primary and post-primary levels to include students with special educational needs more effectively. In addition, they have published a draft curriculum framework and guidelines for children in detention and care (NCCA, 2007b).

Two programmes at second level focus specifically on students deemed at risk of early school leaving and/or under-achievement, namely the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme. Both emphasise cross-curricular work, tasks and projects, along with personal and social development. Available information suggests the programmes are well received by staff and students (Smyth & McCoy, 2009).

Conclusion

In the 20 years since the Special Education Review Committee began its work it is clear there have been significant advances in provision for special educational needs. Against a backdrop of an international movement towards inclusivity in education, Ireland has developed a comprehensive policy and legislative framework underpinning an increased allocation of resources to special educational needs, in a relatively short time period.

In 1993, at the time of the SERC report, approximately 1,950 adults were working with children with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools.

¹⁵ http://www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Syllabuses_and_Guidelines/Guidelines_for_Teachers_of_Students_with_General_Learning_Disabilities.pdf

In 1998 the Government announced that all such children in primary schools would have an automatic entitlement to special education support services – in the form of extra teaching and childcare services. By 2012, over 20,000 adults are working with students with special educational needs in mainstream schools.

Table 18 below shows the increase in the levels of teaching and SNA supports approved by the DES since the publication of the SERC report in 1993. The challenge now, particularly in the current economic context, is to identify existing gaps and deficits in provision; to build capacity to address these gaps and to ensure that the resources provided create the optimum benefit for students with special educational needs.

Table 18: From SERC to here ...

Date	Source	Learning Support and Resource Teachers in mainstream schools	SNA posts	Special classes
1993	SERC report	1309 (remedial teachers) 0 resource teachers	251.5 (note 1)	390 (note 2)
2012	PQ and NCSE	9950 (learning support and resource teachers)	10,575	631
<p>In the 1992-93 school year, 879,878 full-time students enrolled in State-aided primary (including special schools) and post-primary schools (DES, Key Statistics).</p> <p>In the 2011-12 school year, 875,507 students enrolled in State-aided primary (including special schools) and post-primary schools (DES, 2012c).</p>				

Note 1: SNA posts were funded as follows: Fás 30%; DES 28%; health boards 26%; other means (e.g. National Lottery) 16%

Note 2: this figure includes special classes for children from the Travelling community

Table 19: Special schools by county and category

County	School Roll No.	School name	Total Enrolment	School category
Carlow	20370V	Saplings Carlow	12	Autism
Carlow	19315G	St Laserian's Special Sc	153	Mild GLD
Cavan	19439B	Holy Family S S	139	Moderate GLD
Clare	19414I	St Anne's	91	Mild GLD
Clare	19233E	St Clare's	53	Moderate GLD
Cork	19759T	St Mary's	58	Mild GLD
Cork	18458A	St Bernadette's	111	Mild GLD
Cork	18586J	Scoil Éanna	46	Mild GLD
Cork	18208A	Our Lady Of Good Counsel NS	72	Moderate GLD
Cork	19203S	Naomh Pól	97	Moderate GLD
Cork	19433M	Holy Family SS	87	Moderate GLD
Cork	20074R	St Gabriel's	38	Severe /profound GLD
Cork	18483W	School Of The Divine Child	22	Physically disabled
Cork	19760E	Scoil Triest	72	Multiple disabilities
Cork	19410A	St Killian's	71	Specific learning disability

County	School Roll No.	School name	Total Enrolment	School category
Cork	201620	Sonas Special Primary Junior School	24	Autism
Cork	20354A	Cara Special JNS	30	Autism
Cork	20331L	Scoil Aislinn	36	Autism
Donegal	19592J	St Bernadette's	75	Mild GLD
Donegal	19724A	Little Angels Spec Sch	74	Moderate GLD
Dublin	17971H	St Michael's	154	Mild GLD
Dublin	184990	St Augustine's School	166	Mild GLD
Dublin	19325J	St Ciaran's	131	Mild GLD
Dublin	19382V	Scoil Eoin	110	Mild GLD
Dublin	19520H	St Joseph's	119	Mild GLD
Dublin	18671A	St Michael's Hse Grosvenor Rd	62	Moderate GLD
Dublin	18763F	St Michael's Hse Ballymun	57	Moderate GLD
Dublin	19373U	St Michael's Hse Raheny	50	Moderate GLD
Dublin	19757P	St Michael's Hse Skerries	31	Moderate GLD
Dublin	19151C	St John Of God SS	99	Moderate GLD
Dublin	19039I	St Vincent's Home NS	72	Moderate GLD
Dublin	19032R	Stewart's Hospital Special Sc	126	Moderate GLD
Dublin	20053J	Cheeverstown Sp Sch	30	Severe/profound GLD
Dublin	20121A	Carmona Special School	33	Severe/profound GLD
Dublin	18210K	St Michael's House	55	Severe/profound GLD
Dublin	18569J	St Declan's	48	EBD
Dublin	18863J	Benincasa Special School	48	Severe EBD
Dublin	18904U	St Peter's	60	Severe EBD
Dublin	19281P	Mater School	6	Severe EBD
Dublin	19316I	St Paul's Hospital Sp Sch	54	Severe EBD
Dublin	19217G	St Frances Clinic Sp Sch	Figure not available	Severe EBD
Dublin	19500B	Phoenix Park Spec Sch	18	Severe EBD
Dublin	19409P	Casa Caterina	26	Severe EBD
Dublin	196300	Warrenstown Hse	Figure not available	Severe EBD
Dublin	20153N	St Joseph's Adolescent & Family Service	20	Severe EBD
Dublin	18370J	Enable Ireland Sandymount School	50	Physically disabled
Dublin	19590F	Scoil Mochua	51	Physically disabled
Dublin	18317F	Central Remedial Clinic	109	Physically disabled
Dublin	16864B	St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys	48	Hearing impaired
Dublin	17944E	St Mary's School For Deaf Girls	55	Hearing impaired

County	School Roll No.	School name	Total Enrolment	School category
Dublin	18417J	St Josephs For Blind NS	40	Visually impaired
Dublin	19499T	St Oliver Punkett's	63	Specific learning disability
Dublin	19705T	Catherine Mc Auley NS	99	Specific learning disability
Dublin	200100	St Rose's	63	Specific learning disability
Dublin	19355S	Ballyowen Meadows Sp Sch	48	Autism
Dublin	20028K	Setanta Special School	54	Autism
Dublin	20279M	St Michael's House	33	Autism
Dublin	20375I	Abacas Kilbarrack	34	Autism
Dublin	20378O	Abacas Kilnamanagh	18	Autism
Dublin	20381D	Red Door Monkstown	12	Autism
Dublin	20372C	Saplings Rathfarnham	24	Autism
Galway	19201O	Lake View School	42	Mild GLD
Galway	19047H	St Joseph's	65	Moderate GLD
Galway	20070J	Rosedale School	67	Severe /profound GLD
Galway	20328W	St Teresa's	24	Severe /profound GLD
Galway	20329B	Tígh Nan Dooley Special Sch	11	Severe /profound GLD
Galway	20330J	St Oliver's	21	Severe /profound GLD
Galway	19567K	Scoil Áine	18	Severe EBD
Galway	20371A	Abalta Galway	18	Autism
Kerry	19376D	St Ita's & St Joseph's NS	70	Mild GLD
Kerry	19547E	St Francis	53	Moderate GLD
Kerry	19548G	Nano Nagle NS	77	Moderate GLD
Kildare	19455W	St Mark's	63	Mild GLD
Kildare	18988G	St Raphael's	56	Moderate GLD
Kildare	19277B	St Anne's	76	Moderate GLD
Kildare	20376K	Saplings Kill	24	Autism
Kilkenny	19210P	Mother Of Fair Love Spec School	64	Mild GLD
Kilkenny	19383A	St Patrick's	75	Moderate GLD
Kilkenny	19523N	School Of The Holy Spirit	75	Severe EBD
Kilkenny	20380B	Jonah Kilkenny	8	Autism
Kilkenny	20377M	Saplings Goresbridge	12	Autism
Laois	19337Q	St Francis S S	102	Mild GLD
Laois	20100P	The Kolbe Special School	20	Severe /profound GLD
Limerick	18692I	Catherine McAuley	204	Mild GLD
Limerick	19200M	St Vincent's	78	Moderate GLD
Limerick	19603L	St Gabriel's	46	Physically disabled

County	School Roll No.	School name	Total Enrolment	School category
Limerick	19719H	Mid West Sch for Hearing Impaired	17	Hearing impaired
Limerick	20311F	Redhills Special ASD School	60	Autism
Longford	19429V	St Christopher's	27	Moderate GLD
Louth	18772G	St Brigid's	112	Mild GLD
Louth	18936K	St Ita's	93	Mild GLD
Louth	19214A	St Mary's	57	Moderate GLD
Louth	20374G	Abaca's Drogheda	18	Autism
Mayo	19248R	St Anthony's	50	Mild GLD
Mayo	19387I	St Dympna's	34	Mild GLD
Mayo	19375B	St Brid's	20	Moderate GLD
Mayo	19773N	St Nicholas	22	Moderate GLD
Meath	19216E	St Ultan's	113	Mild GLD
Meath	19560T	St Mary's	71	Moderate GLD
Meath	20379Q	Steppings Stones Meath	30	Autism
Offaly	20099K	Offaly School Of Special Ed	13	Severe /profound GLD
Roscommon	19789F	Scoil Micheal Naofa	35	Moderate GLD
Sligo	19340F	St Joseph's	49	Mild GLD
Sligo	19206B	St Cecilia's Sligo	32	Moderate GLD
Tipperary	19230V	Scoil Chormaic	180	Mild GLD
Tipperary	19615S	Scoil Aonghusa	69	Moderate GLD
Tipperary	193700	St Anne's	48	Moderate GLD
Waterford	19244J	St Joseph's	97	Mild GLD
Waterford	19282R	St John's	51	Mild GLD
Waterford	19108B	St Martin's	72	Moderate GLD
Westmeath	18534N	Naomh Mhuire	16	Mild GLD
Westmeath	19792R	St Brigid's	75	Mild GLD
Westmeath	19261J	St Hilda's	32	Moderate GLD
Westmeath	20373E	Saplings Mullingar	12	Autism
Wexford	19266T	Our Lady of Fatima	105	Mild GLD
Wexford	19240B	St Patrick's	128	Moderate GLD
Wicklow	18408I	Newcourt	97	Mild GLD
Wicklow	19522L	St Catherine's	143	Moderate GLD
Wicklow	18281K	Marino School NS	10	Physically disabled

Appendix 2 – The Consultation Process

Introduction

In planning the development of its policy advice for supporting students with special educational needs in schools, the NCSE considered it important to consult key stakeholders to ascertain their views on which elements of the system work well and to identify those requiring review.

This consultation began with a meeting of the NCSE consultative forum in March 2012. This was followed by a series of group discussions with education partners in April-May 2012. Participants were provided with the discussion questions in advance and invited to discuss these, and any issues they raised, with their colleagues. Questions were based on the terms of reference set out for the policy advice. At the conclusion of each consultation, participants were invited to discuss with their colleagues any further issues raised during the discussion and to submit any written proposals to the NCSE for consideration. A list of the groups invited to take part in the consultation process is listed at the end of this appendix.

What follows is a summary of the main views expressed during the process.

What do key stakeholders consider works well in the current system?

Key stakeholders identified the following aspects as working well in the system:

Inclusion of students with special educational needs

All key stakeholders considered the policy of inclusion was working well. There was a general consensus that it worked best where schools were welcoming, where inclusive practices were the norm in schools, where staff were trained and where admission policies were transparent and fair.

Key stakeholders welcomed the development of supports which enabled students with special educational needs to attend, and be educated in, their local schools alongside their siblings and community.

Parents acknowledged and greatly appreciated the important status given to parental choice in legislation

Parents considered that enshrining parental choice in legislation provides security that they will continue to have a say in where their children with special educational needs are to be educated. They regarded this entitlement as very important.

Significant improvement in resourcing special educational needs over the past 20 years

The education partners recognised that there has been considerable improvement in the resourcing of special educational needs through additional allocations of teaching and

SNA supports to schools. These supports have transformed education provision for children with special educational needs. Schools now have more certainty regarding their level of resourcing from year to year and greater flexibility in managing and deploying their additional teaching and care supports.

The education partners acknowledged this Government's prioritisation of the education of these students through its continued allocation of significant levels of resources to schools to support the learning and care needs of these children, despite the serious country's serious economic downturn.

Schools expressed general satisfaction with the current system for allocating additional resources. The system is known, well understood by schools and consistently applied. Resources are delivered in a timely manner, providing a level of certainty to schools and parents. The current system has generated trust, the importance of which should not be underestimated.

There was considerable consensus that the provision of a general allocation of teaching supports for high incidence disabilities to primary schools had been successful as it:

- Enabled schools to focus on student needs with less emphasis on the need to obtain a diagnosis of disability to access additional resources.
- Provided schools with greater flexibility in managing and planning their provision for students with special educational needs.
- Led to reduced administrative workload for schools.
- Provided more certainty for schools regarding their level of additional resources for special educational needs.

Students interviewed as part of the consultation process were positive about the additional teaching and care support available to them in their schools. They felt they benefited from this support when they needed it. The facility to receive additional support as part of a small group, when required, was appreciated. The option most preferred by post-primary students was where additional support was set as an option on the timetable so students receiving additional support simply proceed to the next timetabled class along with other students.

Groups consulted also recognised that many of these students could not be present in a mainstream school without access to SNA support. This support can also be beneficial in addressing behavioural issues.

Significant development in teacher knowledge, understanding and expertise

Partners acknowledged the considerable investment in developing teacher knowledge, understanding and expertise in the education of students with special educational needs in schools. This is particularly the case in primary schools. Teacher education has contributed much to the development of this knowledge. However, further progress is still urgently required, especially at post-primary level where a focus on enabling curricular access for these students is required.

Continuum of provision provides options for placement of students with special educational needs

Partners welcomed the continuum of provision which provided students with special educational needs the opportunity to be educated in a mainstream or special setting – whichever was most appropriate. Partners considered these options should be maintained and each student placement determined on an individual basis with ongoing review and monitoring of progress.

Staged approach to assessment and intervention

The staged approach to providing supports (as exemplified in DES Circular 02/05) and in the NEPS continuum of support documents (2007, 2010) was welcomed and considered to offer a coherent response to identification of special educational needs and provision of supports for children with special educational needs. This system is working well in schools that are implementing the NEPS guidelines and is developing greater understanding of the need to graduate the level of school response to the level of child need.

Professional assessment leading to a diagnosis of disability as basis for allocating resources for low incidence disabilities

Parents and schools saw considerable benefits in the requirement for professional assessment as the basis for allocating resources for low incidence disabilities. In their view it provides:

- Individual professional assessment for students with more complex and enduring needs than are found in the general population of students.
- Professional reports that are useful in assisting parents to understand the nature and extent of their child's disability and that can inform educational planning.
- A professional and objective basis for the allocation of substantial supports (€600 million per year) to students with special educational needs.
- Parents with confidence that there is a clear and transparent basis for allocating these resources.
- Schools with certainty that if a student is diagnosed with a disability, the appropriate resources will be allocated to the school to support the student.

Professional assessments are also considered beneficial because they provide the basis for a differential diagnosis where the presenting difficulties can be attributable to different conditions. For example, when identified at an early age, language difficulties could be attributable to a sensory impairment or intellectual disability or speech and language difficulties or autism. Professional diagnosis can be very important in ensuring the child receives the appropriate interventions as early as possible. Parents and advocacy groups found that the diagnosis of a specific disability assisted them in researching their child's needs and in getting support and information.

Individual education planning

The Individual Education Plan process is working well in many schools especially where key people (parents, school staff and professionals, as required) are involved and where it is used as a working document in the ongoing education of the student.

Teachers acting as co-ordinators

Partners advised that a particularly valuable innovation was where schools had appointed a teacher to act as a coordinator of special education and to be responsible for its overall organisation and planning in the school – liaising with teachers, students and parents as well as providing timetabled support to class teachers.

Establishment of the NCSE and local presence of SENOs

There was consensus that the establishment of the NCSE and the local role of the SENO was a positive development. The availability of a SENO for each school community was viewed as valuable and particularly effective when SENOs function as part of a professional team and play a role in the transition of students from early intervention to primary school. Further positive aspects of the SENO role include their involvement in individual education planning (IEP) and providing information to parents.

HSE early intervention teams

The development of HSE-funded early intervention teams was strongly endorsed and is considered to be working extremely well in certain areas where the teams are fully staffed and there is communication between schools and the relevant professionals. Professional interaction with early intervention teams has increased the system's awareness of children entering the primary school system.

What the education partners considered as needing review

Enrolment policies

Both parents and SENOs reported encountering difficulties in securing placements for students with special educational needs. Considerable concern was expressed by parental and advocacy groups during the consultation regarding the potential for current school enrolment policies and practices to be less than fully inclusive and the ability for individual school management boards to refuse to enrol children with special educational needs or to establish special classes.

Practices were highlighted during the consultation process whereby schools place 'soft' barriers in the way of enrolment by advising parents that a different school is more 'suitable' for their child or has more resources for supporting students with special educational needs. In other examples, schools have refused to enrol a child on the basis that they are not being allocated all the resources, particularly health-funded resources, they consider are required for a particular child. The NCSE is also aware of situations where schools have simply refused to open a special class for a cohort of students where a need has already been identified.

It is particularly difficult when admission policies include references to resource additionality as a condition of enrolment. This makes it difficult for parents to win appeals against a school's refusal to enrol under the Section 29 appellant process.

There was considerable consensus that every school should be required to enrol students with special educational needs on the same basis as all other schools and that this should be robustly reflected in legislation, if necessary.

How special needs are identified and assessed

Requests for unnecessary psychometric assessments

Health professionals expressed concerns about referrals for psychometric assessments which they view as unnecessary. Examples given included where children had already been previously assessed on a number of occasions. In the clinicians' view, there is often no need for further formal assessment in these cases but pressure is brought to bear as parents have been told their child must be assessed to transition to post-primary school. In the view of health professionals, the professional and informed decision of the clinician should be taken into account in deciding when an assessment is deemed appropriate rather than it being driven by an administrative request.

An allied concern is that schools are using the Disability Act, 2005 as a way for children to access professional assessments to trigger additional educational resources. This results in health professional time being taken up in providing assessments rather than in providing interventions for children who require them.

Over-reliance on cognitive assessments

Health professionals expressed a concern about an over-reliance on the use of 'once off' cognitive assessments which are often used to determine access to educational provision for children with special educational needs. This in turn can lead to an increased demand for such assessments. This contributes to the formation of lengthy waiting lists which themselves can create a barrier to appropriate educational placement.

Cognitive assessment is useful in building a profile of student learning strengths and needs, but it is only one element in the overall assessment. Other important elements include adaptive functioning skills and social, emotional and behavioural competencies. These factors may not be given due consideration when time is being taken up providing cognitive assessments.

Difficulty in accessing psychological assessments

Schools and parents report difficulty in accessing the professional assessments required for the diagnosis of disability on which resources for low incidence disabilities are currently based. This is due to a limit being placed on the number of psychological assessments that schools can access in a given school year and because there can be long waiting lists for health assessments in certain areas.

Partners advised that the lack of access to professionals was particularly problematic when the assessment is required for a student in sixth class at the point of transferring to post-primary school. Primary schools generally prioritise assessment of students in earlier

school years due to the importance of early identification and intervention. There is a natural reluctance to use their quota of assessments for students at the point of transferring to post-primary but who may need to be assessed to ensure resource teaching hours for post-primary.

Partners advised that some schools can overcome this difficulty because either school or parent is in a position to fund the procurement of a private assessment or because the school has the support of a local charity or benefactor. They can apply for additional resources based on the results of these private assessments. Partners considered this situation inequitable as it can potentially lead to some students being denied access to resource teaching supports, while students with similar needs in other schools can be supported. There was a general consensus that if access to State resources is linked to professional reports, then access to these professionals must be equitable and not determined by the ability of a parent or school to fund such assessment or the availability of HSE-funded professionals in the area.

Schools were concerned at the level of bureaucracy involved in accessing additional resources and cited the general allocation model as effective in delivering supports without the need for such bureaucracy.

Standardisation of professional reports

Clearer guidelines are required to ensure a standardisation of professional reports to cover professionals working in the public and private sectors. SENOs report considerable variation in these standards in terms of relevant detail provided and clarity of recommendations. While many professional reports are written to high standards, others provide a diagnosis and sufficient information for the allocation of resources but insufficient information to assist schools in developing educational programmes for students with special educational needs. It was acknowledged that lengthy waiting lists and tight deadlines for receiving resource applications may contribute to professionals producing a shorter report.

Health professional assessments should be aligned with educational assessments and incorporate ongoing assessments that teachers routinely carry out. Where they have been conducted outside an educational setting, assessment findings should be communicated in a relevant way to inform the educational/learning and care/support needs of the child in a school setting. Educational assessment should be viewed as an ongoing, cyclical process which informs intervention and contributes to review of progress.

Schools expressed concerns about psychological reports which specify a particular programme to be followed as part of the child's educational programme. This specificity can sometimes involve the school in costly expenditure where a programme already in place could appropriately meet the child's learning needs.

SENOs expressed concerns about professional reports where a bald statement is included to the effect that 'the child meets the Department of Education and Skills criteria (for the purpose of resource allocation)' without specifying a diagnosis or referencing the criteria used in reaching the diagnosis. This can be particularly relevant in the case of emotional and behavioural disorders.

How decisions are made regarding the educational placement of children with special educational needs

The paramount consideration when choosing the appropriate placement for a student with special educational needs should be the best interests of the individual student and those with whom he/she is to be educated. The placement should be monitored and kept under review.

Parental choice is important and parents must have comprehensive information about all the placement options available to make an informed choice.

Partners believed that other factors, such as travelling time, must also be considered when determining the best interests of these pupils. Excessive travelling times involved in attending a particular school can negatively affect learning because of fatigue and in social and emotional terms because the child is leaving his/her community. These social and emotional disadvantages may have long-term consequences and must be considered.

It was suggested that there is currently a change in enrolment patterns whereby parents now choose special school placements for their children rather than mainstream schools as they believe the former will guarantee resources and health supports. This was thought to be due to current fears brought about by the economic recession.

How students with special educational needs are supported in schools and the nature of that support

Early Intervention

Some participants welcomed the establishment of early intervention classes for children with autism. A question was raised, however, on why these are available exclusively for a particular category of disability and not for others. It was proposed that children within other categories of disability might equally benefit from attendance at an early intervention class, for example Deaf/Hard of Hearing children who require a focus on attainment of language skills from an early age.

Health professionals expressed concern about autistic units being created for young children with ASD aged three to five where:

- It is not always possible to predict their cognitive ability.
- They have not yet had the opportunity of interventions so future outcomes are difficult to predict.
- In light of brain plasticity, it may not be best practice to place children in segregated provision at such a young age.

The placement of children aged three in units in special schools was of particular concern to these health professionals as this group has had no opportunity to mix with typically developing peers. Placement in segregated settings was particularly problematic from a psychological perspective, especially where a child's report stated that he/she may be capable of being placed in a mainstream setting.

Home tuition for students with autism

Children with autism may avail of the home tuition scheme from age 2.5 to three or from age three, where an early intervention class is not available or where a school place is not available (DES Circular 0026/2012). Some participants asked if it was sustainable, from an equity perspective, to provide home tuition funding for one category of disability and not for others. Further issues identified with this scheme included the need to monitor quality of provision in the home and the future requirement to vet tutors.

Extended school year scheme

The DES provides funding for an extended school year for children with a severe or profound general learning disability or children with autism. This includes children with ASD in special schools, special classes and, since 2005, children with ASD who receive additional low incidence hours in mainstream schools. The extended year is more commonly known as July provision. Where school-based provision is not feasible, home-based provision may be grant aided.

Concern was raised about the equitable nature of this support in that it is limited to two disability groups only.

Whole school planning and co-ordination of special educational needs provision

Effective whole school planning and co-ordination is considered central to the development of more inclusive schools. There is a need to review the mechanisms by which schools report on and evaluate planning and provision for students with special educational needs including their approach to:

- Assessment of need including curriculum- and skills-based assessment in addition to more formal measures.
- Educational planning and procedures for monitoring of outcomes. This should include the use of evidence-based interventions, how responses to these interventions are monitored and how programmes and instruction are adapted accordingly.
- Use of curriculum differentiation for students with special educational needs.
- Teacher deployment and coordination.
- Planning for the deployment of additional resources.
- Assignment of roles and responsibilities of school personnel in the area of special education.
- Planning for the professional development for all staff, including the special education team, in the area of special educational needs.

Monitoring of outcomes for children with special educational needs

There is currently a paucity of reliable data available in Ireland on the effectiveness of provision and interventions for students with special educational needs. This is critical if the efficiency and effectiveness of provision is to be evaluated. Monitoring outcomes – and adjusting interventions – as required is a critical aspect of effective practice for individual children.

Developing a national database should be considered to capture information on students with special educational needs. There is therefore a need to develop a standard school-based data system in addition to this national database system. Consideration must be given to how relevant student characteristics can be captured which should include academic outcomes, but also include those related to social emotional competence and life skills issues.

individualised education plans provide one way to monitor student outcomes. Group planning can also be worthwhile combined with appropriate elements of individualisation, and individual plans for those students with more severe/complex needs. Time-bound resources may facilitate the monitoring of outcomes, with a needs analysis and response to intervention review after a set period. School staff, parents and other professionals (where appropriate) should be involved in the process of monitoring outcomes.

Professional development of teachers

Many students with special educational needs now spend most of their school day in mainstream classes. If the policy of inclusive education is to be progressed it is essential that all teachers receive appropriate training in teaching students with special educational needs. Class and subject teachers need to have access to relevant continuous professional development (CPD) and need a support network within the school that offers continuing guidance and support.

Additional educational support required for unmet needs

Certain educational needs were perceived as unmet by the current system such as reinforcing literary and numeracy skills, interpreting teacher instructions, focusing on the task at hand etc. Across all groups, considerable consensus emerged that students with special educational needs would benefit from additional teaching/educational support in schools.

It was suggested that these needs might be met through the development of a new grade of 'teaching assistant'. It should be noted, however, that the potential for this new grade arose only occasionally during consultation and at few meetings.

Post-primary schools were particularly concerned at the need for additional teaching supports for their students. Representatives felt many post-primary students needed additional teaching so they could access a meaningful curriculum, sit State exams and participate fully in classes.

Concern was also expressed at the low level of learning support available in some disadvantaged schools relative to the needs of students enrolled.

Care supports

Partners were appreciative of the SNA scheme and its support for students. Frustration was evident, however, that SNAs were being diverted to other schools when students could continue to benefit from para-educational supports such as literacy and numeracy reinforcement.

There were concerns that the SNA scheme system encourages dependency in students with special educational needs rather than promoting their independence. Post-primary groups expressed grave concerns about the suitability of the model for their schools. As students grow older, they are reluctant to have an adult accompanying them about the school. Concerns were also expressed that the presence of an SNA can erect a barrier to participation and socialisation. Students expressed their belief that the presence of an SNA had inhibited friendship formation.

One group expressed the view that considerably more potential could be realised from the scheme. For example, SNAs could act as mentors as well as carers to students with EBD/severe EBD. They could play a mediating role between the culture of the children's homes and the culture of the school.

Supporting students with mental health/emotional needs

The provision of additional supports to students should not be limited to academic education, but should include social and emotional support also. The mental health and well-being of students can affect their learning ability. There is often a need to address an underlying psychiatric/psychological difficulty before addressing learning needs. Cognitive behavioural therapy and therapeutic support are necessary at times to reduce symptoms so that a student can engage with learning. In devising a learning plan for a student with mental health needs, there should be input from mental health professionals on that aspect of the plan.

There can be unforeseen changes in the emotional needs of a student at particular times and additional supports can be required. Short-term, immediate access to additional support in these situations is beneficial.

The provision of a behaviour support classroom (as offered to schools associated with the NBSS), was offered as one example of how a student's social and emotional needs can be addressed.

IT supports

Adequate IT training should be provided to students with special educational needs in primary school to facilitate their transition into post-primary and equip them with the skills necessary to access reasonable accommodations available in State exams at this level.

How additional teaching resources for students with special educational needs are allocated to school

The consultation process acknowledged that where resources are limited, it is important that they are focused where they are most needed while also balancing the need for administrative efficiency. The objective should be that children with the greatest levels of need get the teaching supports required so that best use is made of State resources in difficult economic circumstances.

Significant concern was expressed through the consultation process that the current generalised allocation process for primary schools does not fully achieve this objective as

for the most part, resources are allocated to primary schools on the basis of class teachers employed rather than on the profile of students with special educational needs enrolled.

General allocation model (GAM) in primary schools

Groups consulted suggested a continuing incomplete understanding on the part of some schools on how the general allocation model works. Some schools do not appear to understand that resources can be differentially deployed under the GAM according to students' level of need. There was concern that the needs of some students with mild general learning difficulties and significant adaptive functioning difficulties are not being fully met through the GAM as some schools were not using the model in this way.

One group raised the appropriateness of including students with Down syndrome and mild general learning disability within the cohort of students supported under the GAM. Many of these students, it was suggested, have significant needs in addition to mild general learning disability, including medical needs, auditory processing difficulties, visual impairment, speech and language difficulties and so on. Because of this, it was suggested by this group that all children with Down syndrome should be categorised under low incidence disability and resourced as such.

Concerns existed that rural schools in areas of significant disadvantage and without DEIS status may have students whose special educational needs are not being met.

While the GAM is limited to a certain number of high incidence categories it was suggested it could usefully be expanded to include other disabilities currently resourced within the low incidence categories. Possible categories for consideration include EBD/severe EBD, dyspraxia and specific speech and language disorder. This would mean students within these categories would no longer require a professional report before accessing support in schools. For some categories of disability, increased or individual support may be allocated initially to provide early intensive support, for example for those with specific speech and language disorder or students with EBD/severe EBD to prevent the difficulties becoming entrenched.

Some consultation groups expressed grave concerns about the effectiveness of extending the current GAM model to post-primary schools. At this level, enrolments are often not representative of the population of their immediate local areas. Variation is greater across post-primary for enrolment of students with special educational needs. For these reasons, there was concern that a block allocation of GAM supports based on enrolment figures would not be equitable. An evidence-based allocation was considered preferable, whereby use is made of current data on all students, including those with special educational needs. Such evidence could include the results of standardised literacy and numeracy tests, results of entrance assessments, diagnostic testing and so on.

Allocation of additional teaching resources to schools for low incidence special educational needs

Schools and parents believed it necessary to maintain a separate resource allocation process for individual children with low incidence needs in primary and post-primary schools.

Nevertheless, concern was expressed about how additional resources are currently allocated to schools to support these students. It was suggested that parental tensions around the allocation process are heightened because schools cannot apply for resources until after the child has been enrolled. Parental representatives believed that schools sometimes refuse to enrol certain children with special educational needs because they consider they will not get the resources they consider necessary for his/her support.

Representatives were further concerned that while students with the greatest level of difficulty get additional support, many who score just above the threshold will receive no support.

They noted the additional complexity of the post-primary system places greater stress on students and their learning needs can increase as a result.

It was suggested that while the current system works well for students with long-term and enduring difficulties, there is no mechanism to respond to a student with emergency, short-term needs whose learning, for example, is affected by a family bereavement, by serious short-term emotional difficulties or physical injuries following a road traffic accident.

Views diverged on how resources should be allocated to schools to support students with low incidence special educational needs. Some groups expressed the view that there should be a move away from the category-based model and that the link between assessment, diagnosis and resource allocation should be broken.

Others urged caution in this respect and emphasised the dangers inherent in a total system overhaul. They maintained that:

- The current system, despite its flaws, is known, transparent and consistently applied and these aspects should be continued.
- Schools and parents value the existing link between diagnosis of disability and sanctioning of additional resources. They consider the independent professional report provides an objective and transparent basis on which to allocate resources.
- The current model provides certainty to the school and the parent that the individual child will receive resources once the professional assesses the child within a certain category of disability.
- Following diagnosis, it is clear to parents, schools and professionals what additional time will be available for a student. This cannot be misinterpreted or open to degrees of interpretation or variance. There is a fear that any change to the system could result in schools coming under increased pressure from parents who feel their child is getting insufficient support.

Those in favour of a move away from the current system did so on the basis that:

- The current system is inequitable as not all children have access to professional assessments and were thus being denied access to teaching and care supports or there was an extended delay in such allocations.

- The need for professional assessments caused considerable anxiety amongst parents because of either the delay in accessing such an assessment or because they had to pay considerable amounts of money to procure such an assessment.
- Current research suggests resource allocation should be based on individual needs rather than on category of disability. Representatives realised that every student with a disability does not necessarily have a special educational need and the impact of a disability on learning will be different for individuals within the same category. Students within any particular diagnostic category, therefore, may not have identical needs that require identical resources. Needs should be assessed on an individual basis and take into account both within person factors and environmental factors which relate to school, family and community.
- Learning profiles of students with special educational needs should be more emphasised when determining additional supports rather than their category of disability.
- The existing link between diagnosis and resource allocation promotes an ever expanding drive for labelling and diagnosis for resource allocation purposes, some of which may be inappropriate. Professional time can be consumed with the process of assessment leading to diagnosis with a concomitant reduction in time available for planning, treatment/intervention and review.
- Particular concerns focused on students perhaps receiving lifelong diagnoses (sometimes from an early age) from a limited assessment process, with little attention to continuing review and support.
- The need for assessments associated with schemes such as Reasonable Accommodation in State Examinations (RACE) and Disability Access Routes (DARE) is creating a further demand.
- Health professionals are under pressure to ensure their assessments meet criteria for resource allocation.
- Health professionals reported considerable difficulty in producing reports within the stipulated timeframe, given their other professional commitments which can include statutory Assessment of Need assessments, therapeutic interventions, diagnostic assessments and other clinical duties.
- Health professionals believe it may not always be in the child's best interests to review their needs too far in advance of their entry to school as these may change considerably over a few months given the dynamic nature of a child's developmental path at an early age.

While believing that the diagnosis of disability should not be a requirement for assessment of special educational needs and subsequent allocation of funding, partners considered that assessments should continue to play a useful part in constructing a detailed profile of the child's strengths and needs which can inform planning and intervention for the child. The use of categories of disability can also be useful in planning support provision generally and for developing systems of accountability.

How systems are working together to maximise effectiveness of available resources

Health and education

At present, it appears that communication and coordination of services between the Departments of Health and Education vary significantly across regions and require greater consistency. When these systems are well coordinated, the following elements are in place:

- HSE professionals meet NCSE staff and teachers. Information is exchanged between all professionals involved in a student's education. This facilitates planning both for both departments.
- Improved communication and co-ordination facilitates the transfer of information between Health and Education. Schools should know if a child is under HSE care before they enter junior infants, as this enables the school to access resources for that child. It was proposed that one person (possibly the school principal or the SENO) should be accountable for ensuring that the necessary education and health supports are provided.
- Health services are delivered on school grounds (speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, for instance). This means students are absent from school for shorter periods as the travelling time required to attend community services is eliminated. It enables professionals to learn from one another as they work together in the school. In some cases, this means programmes developed can be incorporated into the classroom if and when appropriate.
- Schools are open to working with the HSE in supporting intervention programmes. This is particularly, but not solely, the case with well-resourced schools (e.g. DEIS).
- Interagency training takes place to promote a mutual understanding of different roles and responsibilities. An example of interagency training recommended is through Elklan, a training organisation which provides speech and language therapists with skills to allow them to deliver training to teachers. This can enable teachers to be more effective in their support of children with speech and language difficulties, providing them with practical strategies for classroom use. It can also help them identify when referral for specialist assessment is necessary. Elklan training is also available to parents.

Pre-schools, mainstream schools and schools in specialist settings

There should be improved communication and coordination between:

- pre-school and primary schools
- primary and post-primary schools
- mainstream schools and special schools

There are local examples where communication between schools is organised and well developed. The DES should formalise such arrangements and ensure consistent application across regions. When present, home school community liaison teachers can often facilitate this cross-communication. SENOs could equally have a role in coordinat-

ing between schools for children with special educational needs. For example, in some regions, SENOs meet principals of special schools and post-primary schools every March. This supports communication between special and mainstream schools and good working relationships have been established. It facilitates student placement which is particularly important for those students at points of transition.

Considerable expertise has been developed in special schools. A relationship should be built up between mainstream schools and special schools so that this expert knowledge and experience can be shared. As this could challenge resources, a core team in mainstream schools could liaise with special schools for particular special needs or a teacher from a mainstream school could visit the special school as required. Local arrangements can be made to facilitate this and it should be explored as a cost neutral option which will draw on the expert knowledge developed.

How schools work together to make transition arrangements

All groups recognised that transition is a stress point in the lives of young people with special educational needs. This stressful period is not sufficiently acknowledged or addressed by schools, it was suggested, and insufficient time is being put into preparing these children for transition. Schools should plan for the event and manage arrangements proactively.

In primary and post-primary schools internal transition points were noted with high cognitive demand, e.g. transitioning from second to third class or between the junior and senior cycles at post-primary. Students with special educational needs must be supported through this. It was also suggested that sometimes children have progressed to sixth class who cannot read or write at the appropriate level, and therefore are ill-equipped for transition to second level.

Transfer of information

Communication and transfer of information must take place between schools, parents and professionals, particularly at times of:

- Transition from pre- to primary school.
- Transition from primary to post-primary school.
- Transition from mainstream to special school and vice versa.

Communication and transfer of information at key points will facilitate transition. Often informal, local arrangements are in place and information is shared between schools. Where this is the case and where a good relationship exists, this transfer of information happens easily and effectively and is very beneficial. This system should be standardised and formalised nationally. The transfer now required by the literacy and numeracy strategy was noted in this respect. For students with special needs moving to second-level, communication and transfer of information should take place from fifth or sixth class to assist planning for the continuum of provision. Parents should also be included from an early stage.

For a student to be appropriately placed, an open transfer of information, including disclosure of difficulties, must occur between the relevant people before the placement

happens. Enrolling a student without this can obviously be problematic. An open discussion can help identify the most appropriate placement based on facilities available, student needs and what each school can cater for.

Sometimes parents may not allow certain information to be included in a report in case it affects their child's access to a school. Parents have a right to choose their child's school but this should be an informed choice and sometimes parents' knowledge of the system can be incomplete. Added to this, sometimes schools can refuse to enrol a child without making clear to parents the basis for this. More transparency is needed about how schools make enrolment decisions for students with special educational needs.

Type of information to be transferred

There should be clarity about what information can be transferred between schools and between health and education professionals. Issues of confidentiality and parental consent must be addressed. The information to be transferred should then be agreed, standardised nationwide and provided as early as possible.

When a student is moving into second-level, 'soft' information from sixth class teachers is of greatest help. This can provide a sense of behaviour patterns, the student's social and care needs and overall academic performance. Trust must be developed between schools as relationships evolve with feeder schools over time. Transfer of the most recent psychological reports is also important.

Table 20: Participants in consultation process

Participants	Number of participants
Teacher representatives	8 (made up of primary, post-primary and special school teachers).
Voluntary bodies	6
School management bodies	8
Special needs assistants	4
HSE professionals	13
Principal representatives	8
Special educational needs organisers	10
Parent representatives	8
Advocacy groups	10
National Educational Psychological Service	9
Students	10 post-primary 7 primary 9 special school
Total participants	110

Source: NCSE 2012

Appendix 3 – Framework for the Professional Development of Teachers

Introduction

The following recommendations for the professional development of teachers for students with special educational needs were developed in the context of a number of important findings from the literature:

- The quality of teachers and their teaching are the most important factors in student outcomes (OECD, 2005:12).
- The key factor contributing to student progress, including those with complex needs, is access to experienced and qualified specialist teachers (OFSTED, 2006).
- The appropriate training of mainstream teachers is crucial if they are to be confident and competent in teaching children with diverse educational needs. The principles of inclusion should be built into teacher training programmes, which should be about attitudes and values not just knowledge and skills (WHO, 2011).

Training for teachers of children with special educational needs should be provided within an overall framework for initial and continuing professional development and should be both generalist and specialist in nature. Where practicable, experience of people with disabilities should be included as part of the programme delivery.

Teachers should be equipped with the competencies required to teach all children in their classrooms, including children with special educational needs. In particular, the specific requirements of post-primary teachers should be considered in the development and provision of programmes, given the complexity of the post-primary system and the fact that most post-primary teachers are subject specialists. Specialist training in special education should follow on from a general teaching qualification and ideally at a later date when the teacher has gained experience in teaching children both with and without special educational needs.

Programmes of continuing professional development should be available on an ongoing basis and be regularly updated so that teacher knowledge and skills-sets reflect current understandings of what constitutes good practice for the education of students with special educational needs. Quality assurance of these programmes by the DES is essential.

Teachers should also be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and professional development so their dependency on external CPD is reduced over time. For example, they should not require external input on each new disability encountered but rather know where such information can be accessed. It is important to develop their capacity to find information and take professional responsibility for accessing and assessing it. Through CPD teachers should be empowered to undertake such investigations, to reflect critically on their current classroom practices and to adopt more inclusive approaches when required. The key elements of such an approach are:

- Development of reflective capacity.

- Development of knowledge and confidence to investigate needs not encountered before.

Schools should be strongly advised to build and maintain a team of teachers with the experience and training necessary to support the diverse needs of students with special educational needs. This is vital to ensure that effective interventions are delivered and that competent staff are available to evaluate needs, implement evidence-based programmes, and provide advice to parents, and other teachers on effective practice.

The formation of special educational needs teams is advised as they provide a suitable organisational structure that enables teachers in a specialist role to support each other and to work effectively with mainstream teachers in meeting student needs. A member of the special needs team may be assigned the responsibility for co-ordinating provision, in liaison with the principal and special educational needs team (see DES post-primary guidelines on inclusion, 2007:68-69).

Professional development of teachers

Initial teacher education

- Standards of teaching in relation to the knowledge, skills, understanding and competence necessary for teaching students with special educational needs should be established by the Teaching Council. These standards should underpin initial teacher education programmes and the assessment of students through school placement and examinations. They should be additional to those required for teaching all students.
- Programmes should include a compulsory module on the education of children with special educational needs, to include information on the main categories of special education and their implications for teaching and learning. It should be mandatory for students to achieve a pass in this module to achieve the qualification being awarded.
- Mandatory placement in a special education setting (to include special schools, special and mainstream classes) recognised to be a model of good practice should form a central element of the compulsory module.
- Programmes should be developed around principles of universal design and inclusive pedagogy. At the end of ITE, the NCSE advises that teachers should demonstrate competence in:
 - Understanding their responsibility for the academic progress and inclusion of all children within their class groups, including those children with special educational needs.
 - Awareness and understanding of children with special educational needs across the different categories of disability and the ways in which these needs affect teaching and learning.

- Ability to plan at whole class and individual level.¹⁶
- Ability to manage and balance diverse needs in the classroom.
- Ability to differentiate the curriculum in the context of facilitating inclusion of students with special educational needs.
- Understanding and knowledge of teaching methodologies and approaches effective with children with special educational needs.
- Ability to assess for and of learning.
- Ability to use effective methodologies and approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy for all children and in particular how these approaches can be differentiated for children with special educational needs.
- Ability to collaborate effectively with other professionals, to include an understanding of their roles and reports that issue from them.
- Ability to collaborate effectively with other support staff in the classroom.
- Ability to collaborate effectively with parents.
- Organisational and administrative competence, as required.
- Awareness, understanding and knowledge of the appropriate use of ICT and assistive technologies for children with special educational needs in the classroom situation.

These programmes should form a substantial element of ITE and be of sufficient duration to enable teachers to acquire the above competences.

- Programmes of ITE for post-primary teachers should take into account the particular complexity of, and the subject specialisation attached to, teaching in the post-primary system.

Continuing professional development

For all teachers

- The Teaching Council should stipulate mandatory levels and frequency of CPD that teachers are required to undertake for teaching students with special educational needs within an overall framework of CPD. Programmes should include a focus on development of specialist skills appropriate to particular groups of students with special educational needs and collaborative working skills.
- As part of school developing planning, schools should outline a formal plan of CPD for class teachers and for learning support and resource teachers that addresses the teaching of children with special educational needs. This plan should include provision for delivery of such CPD at a whole school level.

¹⁶ The Programme for Government 2011 proposes the ‘publication of a plan for the implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004 to prioritise access for children with special needs to an individual education plan’. Council considers that the publication of such a plan would be helpful to the colleges in preparing students to undertake planning at whole class and individual level.

- It should be recognised that the high level competencies achieved during ITE should be built on through CPD. CPD for all teachers should include:¹⁷
 - Information on children with special educational needs, including different categories of disability.
 - Planning at whole class and individual level.
 - Differentiation in the context of facilitating inclusion of students with special educational needs.
 - Teaching methodologies effective with children with special educational needs.
 - Advanced courses in the assessment for and of learning.
 - Teaching of literacy and numeracy.
 - Knowledge of ICT.
 - Organisation and administration.
 - Classroom management.

The requirements of post-primary teachers should be taken into account in the design and delivery of CPD programmes. Particular consideration should be given to the:

1. Reality that many post-primary teachers are subject specialists who require additional support in teaching literacy and numeracy.
 2. Nature and structure of the syllabus taught in post-primary schools.
 3. Focus on the State examinations and the pressures experienced by post-primary schools in preparing students for these examinations.
 4. Organisational structure of post-primary schools, including organisation of classes and timetabling.
- As part of a school's planning for the enrolment of particular students with special educational needs, CPD should be made available to all teachers for the specific categories being presented. This is particularly the case where a school has no previous experience of this type of disability.
 - The TES should consider establishing an online forum through which information on effective approaches to teaching children with special educational needs could be gathered from practising teachers and shared. The first World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011) recognises that teachers should have opportunities to 'share expertise and experiences about inclusive education and to adapt and experiment with their own teaching methods in supportive environments'.

¹⁷ This is for teachers currently in the system whose initial training did not include the mandatory elements proposed in this paper.

For teachers in specialist roles and settings (learning support/resource teachers, visiting teachers, teachers in special schools and classes)

- The Teaching Council should stipulate mandatory levels and frequency of CPD for teachers in specialist roles/settings that include opportunities to develop skills appropriate to teaching particular groups of students and collaborative working skills for interaction with colleagues, parents and professionals.
- The DES should consider the possibility of requiring teachers in specialist roles and settings to hold a recognised post graduate diploma in special education and/or a post graduate diploma in a specific disability category. Opportunities for placement in a special education setting should be available as an integral part of postgraduate programmes in special education.
- Further development of competences or standards that define the specific skills, knowledge and understanding required for teachers working with students within different categories of special educational needs, should underpin continuing professional development for these teachers.
- The TES should provide a strategic programme of professional development designed and delivered specifically to teachers in special schools to address, in an in-depth manner, the complex and diverse needs of students attending special schools.
- The requirements of post-primary teachers should be taken into account in the design and delivery of programmes of continuing professional development for these teachers, as addressed in the above section.

For principals and deputy-principals

- An ongoing programme of CPD should be designed and delivered for principals and deputy principals. This should focus on providing leadership for the education of students with special educational needs in schools. It could be delivered through the leadership programmes of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

Appendix 4 – Summary of Support Needs

Table 21: Summary of support needs and the type of support that may be required¹⁸

Additional learning needs requiring teacher support	Additional needs requiring care support	Assistive technology
<p>Students with sensory disabilities (includes those who are Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing students) may require:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching of braille • Training to make effective use of technology (e.g. touch typing, access software) • Support in the early acquisition of a language • Development of a communication system • Linguistic/communication environment modified • Irish Sign Language for those students who use it 	<p>Qualified O&M instructor: Orientation and Mobility</p> <p>Some children who are Blind or with serious Visual Impairment may need SNA assistance while they learn their way around the school</p> <p>Some Deaf children who communicate exclusively through the use of ISL may require support from an SNA who is a competent ISL user.</p>	<p>Low vision aids; Big-print books; Screen magnifiers and Screen readers; Braille technologies; Hearing aids; FM systems; Sound-field systems; Whiteboards; Acoustic treatment of classroom.</p>
<p>Students with physical disabilities may have no additional learning needs.</p> <p>Some students with physical disabilities may require:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra time for completion of tasks • Differentiated physical education programme 	<p>Some students with physical and/or intellectual disabilities may required access to care support for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimate care (toileting, catheterisation) • Feeding (peg feeding, difficulties in swallowing, support towards independent feeding) • Manual handling (use of hoists, standing frames, walkers) • Transport needs (boarding and alighting from bus) • Supervision of students who are physically very vulnerable as a result of physical disabilities such as brittle bone disease 	<p>Wheelchairs; Specialised furniture and equipment; Adapted school buildings; Mobility aids; Additional space.</p>

¹⁸ The information compiled in this table is based on findings from research literature and the consultation process

Additional learning needs requiring teacher support	Additional needs requiring care support	Assistive technology
<p>Students with learning/intellectual disabilities may require support in developing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and communication (verbal and non-verbal) skills • Social skills • Social imagination skills • Literacy and numeracy skills • Differentiated teaching • Individualised education planning • Use of evidence-based teaching and learning methodologies based on an in-depth knowledge of the student and what is the teaching and learning objective. • Additional support in using appropriate technologies • Structured classroom environment • Explicit teaching of organisational skills, e.g. mind-mapping • Adjustments to classroom environment to facilitate the use of prompts, cues or other teaching and learning strategies 	<p>Some children with special educational needs may have heightened sensory sensitivity. As a consequence these students may engage in self injurious or aggressive or hyperactive behaviour that is a danger to themselves or others. In these cases, they may need SNA support to assist the teacher in managing such behaviours.</p>	<p>ICT; Adjustments to classroom to address sensory issues; Use of a multisensory room.</p>
<p>Students with emotional and behaviour difficulties may require the development of a whole school policy outlining school plans and strategies for promotion of positive behaviour and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support in learning to develop good relationship with teachers • Organised structured learning environment • Teachers knowledgeable on use of evidence based programmes for students with EBD • Support in developing social, emotional and personal skills • Appropriate curriculum • Attention re-directed to task set • Consistent and clear classroom rules • Individual behaviour plan, developed with multi-disciplinary team, where necessary 	<p>Some children with EBD/ severe EBD may have care needs arising from a history of extremely challenging behaviours such as violent behaviour, assault, self-harm or where behaviour is such that it is impossible to teach him or her in a classroom situation.</p> <p>In these cases, the SNA can support the teacher to meet his/her care needs by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserving the safety of the child and others with whom the child is in contact • Acting as a positive role model for the child • Reinforcing good behaviour on the child's part 	

Appendix 5 – List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The EPSEN Act is fully implemented as soon as resources permit.

Recommendation 2

A new model should be developed for the allocation of additional teaching resources to mainstream schools which is based on the profiled need of each school, without the need for a diagnosis of disability.

Recommendation 3

The relevant State Departments (health, education, children and social protection) and agencies should develop and implement one national system of assessment which can be used to access services across all areas.

Recommendation 4

- 4.1 The Teaching Council and the DES should ensure that teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, understanding and competence to meet the diverse learning needs of students with special educational needs.
- 4.2 The Teaching Council should stipulate mandatory levels and frequency of CPD that teachers are required to undertake for teaching students with special educational needs within an overall framework of CPD for teachers.
- 4.3 The NCSE considers that the DES should conduct a training audit of all schools to establish how many currently have access to a trained learning support/resource teacher.

Recommendation 5

The DES should clarify the role and responsibilities of all educational professionals in relation to special educational needs, including class teachers, and support teachers to ensure a full understanding of the nature and extent of their responsibilities.

Recommendation 6

- 6.1 The ECCE scheme should provide the State's early intervention support for *all* pre-school children, including those with the most complex special educational needs and should be appropriately resourced to do so. Resources from existing State funded early intervention schemes should therefore be merged into the ECCE scheme.
- 6.2 The Department of Children, in the context of their responsibility for the ECCE scheme, should therefore specify the necessary qualifications for ECCE staff to ensure they are sufficiently trained in early childhood education and special educational needs.

Recommendation 7

- 7.1 The importance and centrality of the teacher in the education and care of all students, including students with special educational needs, should be restated by the Department of Education and Skills.
- 7.2 The DES should similarly clarify the role of the SNA, as recommended in the recent VFM report.
- 7.3 Additional teaching and care supports allocated to schools should be deployed on the basis of individualised educational planning which clearly demonstrates the requirement for this support and the way in which it will be used to benefit the student in reaching the goals and targets set.
- 7.4 Boards of management should ensure that SNAs receive sufficient training and have the necessary competence to undertake the duties assigned to them in the school.

Recommendation 8

- 8.1 The allocation of care supports to schools for students with special educational needs should be time-bound and linked to care targets set as part of the individualised learning plan process (incorporating care plans) drawn up by schools.
- 8.2 Schools should report to the NCSE against care targets set in the individualised education plan to ensure external oversight of the use of additional care supports.
- 8.3 Transition to post-primary should be recognised as a critical time for a student with special educational needs. Individualised education plans for fourth and fifth class students should reflect this and focus on ensuring that student care needs are, in so far as possible, ameliorated before moving to post-primary. Only students with chronic and serious care needs arising from a disability should require SNA support in sixth class in primary and in post-primary schools. Care supports freed up as a result, should be reinvested in further supplementary teaching supports for this group of students.
- 8.4 Further supplementary teaching support from fully qualified teachers should be provided in post-primary to drive the improvement of educational outcomes for students by improving literacy and numeracy levels, by increasing student engagement in school and by enabling teaching support models to be put in place which more appropriately address their educational needs.
- 8.5 Post-primary schools need to plan for enrolling students with special educational needs and put in place plans to assist students who may experience difficulties around transitioning.

Recommendation 9

A new basis for the allocation of additional care supports should be developed for special schools and classes.

Recommendation 10

The NCSE should establish a working group, with AT expertise, to develop a national policy on standards for professional recommendations and to determine the supports required in an educational context and the best ongoing utilisation of these resources.

IT expertise in the education and training boards should be explored to establish whether these boards could have an ongoing role in providing expertise on assistive technology to schools regionally.

Recommendation 11

The DES should clarify the purpose of the extended school year scheme (July Provision) and revisit its eligibility criteria.

Recommendation 12

12.1 In cases where adaptations to school buildings are required, schools should work out their requirements and submit an application to the building unit as soon as they know a certain student/s with special educational needs is being enrolled. Schools should facilitate this enrolment by having a flexible enrolment policy which enables early planning.

12.2 The DES should agree a list of specialist equipment which will be provided for all schools that enrol students with special educational needs who require such equipment, in accordance with the individual needs of these students.

Recommendation 13

13.1 The DES consider extending the enhanced level of capitation grant to post-primary schools with special classes on the same basis as primary schools to assist them with the increased running costs associated with these classes.

13.2 A funding mechanism is put in place to enable schools to replace necessary equipment for use with students in special schools and classes.

Recommendation 14

The NCSE should develop and publish guidelines for transitional arrangements for students with special educational needs. These should specifically address planning required to ensure that advance arrangements are in place, outline the roles and responsibilities of parents, schools, educational and health personnel and advise on transfer of relevant information at times of transition.

Recommendation 15

The NCCA should be requested to develop level 1 programmes for that small number of students unable to access programmes at level 2, NFQ. The NCCA should further consider how the achievements of students working towards level 1 qualifications are to be recorded.

Recommendation 16

The DES should review the role of the visiting teacher service in light of the other services now available in schools.

Recommendation 17

17.1 The expertise of the NBSS should be used to inform training programmes for teachers in managing challenging behaviour, in line with the NCSE previous policy advice on the education of students with challenging behaviour arising from severe EBD (NCSE, 2012).

17.2 The role of the NBSS should also be reviewed to ensure cohesion across service provision.

Recommendation 18

Children and young people with special educational needs should be recognised as a key health priority. Pending the full roll-out of the progressing disability services for children 0-18 programme, the HSE should develop a plan that provides adequate clinical and therapeutic supports for children and young people with special educational needs, irrespective of school placement.

Recommendation 19

As a matter of priority, the DES should ensure that relevant information on students with special educational needs is recorded as part of a national data base – to be developed for primary students and further developed at post-primary level. The information should be based on the development of a standard school-based data system with one unique student identifier to allow maximum interaction with other databases.

Recommendation 20

20.1 The NCSE should provide further information for parents of children with special educational needs to build on the initial NCSE information booklet already published. In particular, the NCSE should provide information to parents about choosing a school and supporting their children with special educational needs to make key transitions.

20.2 The NCSE should develop and deliver a comprehensive parental information programme which is available in all areas of the country. The initial roll-out of this programme should be targeted at the parents of pre-school aged children.

Recommendation 21

The NCSE strongly recommends that the DES introduces a robust regulatory enrolment framework for schools to ensure that:

- Every child with special educational needs is protected from enrolment practices or policies with overt or covert barriers that block his/her access to enrolment in the school.
- Every child with special educational needs may enrol in the nearest school that is or can be resourced by the NCSE to meet his/her needs.
- A school must enrol a student with special educational needs if so directed by the SENO on the basis that the school will be provided with resources in line with national policy.
- A school must establish a special class if so requested by a SENO.

Recommendation 22

- 22.1 The allocation of additional teaching supports should be in line with the profiled educational need of each school. Additional teaching and care supports should only be sanctioned on the basis that planning is in place for the students concerned, as part of the learning plan process. The deployment of these resources should be linked to the student's learning plan process, be time-bound and outcome focused.
- 22.2 The DES should consider giving a more formal basis to the NEPS-DES continuum of support guidelines by developing them into a code of practice which it would be mandatory for schools to follow.
- 22.3 The DES should arrange for guidelines to be developed for primary and post-primary schools to assist principals and teachers in deploying support to students. Existing guidelines should be revised and updated to take account of the new system.

Recommendation 23

If the Minister were to agree in principle to the introduction of the alternative model proposed, the NCSE will then proceed to the next phase and establish a working group to develop it.

Recommendation 24

- 24.1 Before additional teaching and care supports are sanctioned for students with special educational needs, schools should confirm that planning is in place for the students concerned, as part of the learning plan process. Once additional supports for students with special educational needs arising from both high and low incidence special educational needs are allocated to a school, their deployment should be linked to individualised planning processes in line with the NEPS continuum of provision.
- 24.2 Schools should be required to provide annual reports to the NCSE on progress made and student outcomes achieved through the learning plan process.
- 24.3 Students with acquired brain injury; mild hearing loss; developmental co-ordination disorder (including dyspraxia), and/or students who have emergency short-term needs following physical injuries sustained, for example, in a road traffic

accident and those whose learning is affected by a family bereavement or by serious short-term emotional difficulties should have access to learning support teachers.

- 24.4 The DES should restate and clarify the criteria for access to additional supports for students with physical disabilities and severe EBD to ensure that resources are directed at students with the greatest need within these categories.
- 24.5 Conditions exist where student functioning can improve through intervention over time. These conditions include specific speech and language disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders and certain physical disabilities. The additional resources provided for these categories should therefore be provided on a time-bound basis for a period of three years and student progress should be annually reviewed by the school, and where necessary, with the NEPS psychologist.
- 24.6 The DES should reiterate that additional teaching resources for students with learning support and high incidence disabilities can be allocated differentially in accordance with their learning needs (DES, 2005).

Recommendation 25

The DES should provide for the establishment of a new type of special school with rules and organisational structures appropriate to the profile and age of students with complex special educational needs enrolled.

Recommendation 26

- 26.1 The NCSE considers that placement in special schools and classes should continue for the present, pending the outcome of a national assessment model, to be based on a formal assessment of disability. Professional reports used for placement decisions should be based on an objective assessment of a student's overall needs. They should address the student's experience to date and the interventions that were or could be put in place to support his/her continued inclusion in mainstream education. Finally the report should explain the available placement options and outline their implications.
- 26.2 There should be an admissions committee for each special school and special class to make recommendations to the board of management concerning admission of students with special educational needs to such settings. NEPS and the NCSE should be represented on the admissions committee.

Recommendation 27

- 27.1 The NCSE recommends that the existing ratios should continue to provide the basis for the appointment of staff to special schools and classes.
- 27.2 Special schools for severe/profound learning disabilities catering for students with chronic high dependency needs requiring ongoing medical intervention to survive, should be allowed to establish one class group on a PTR of 4:1 and the HSE should provide funding for access to a school nurse.

- 27.3 The DES should enable special schools to provide structured engagement between parents and schools. The option of including special schools in the home school community liaison scheme should be explored as one way of achieving this on a cost neutral basis.

Recommendation 28

- 28.1 The DES should, in consultation with the NCSE, issue the teaching staff arrangements for special schools on an annual basis, as happens for mainstream primary and post-primary schools and in accordance with prevailing policy parameters.
- 28.2 Once allocated, the deployment of teaching and care staff in special schools/classes should become the principal's responsibility. The principal should have sufficient flexibility to deploy the staff and assign students to classes in accordance with their learning needs which can change in the course of a year. This is in line with the Education Act, 1998 which states that schools are responsible for ensuring that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs are identified and provided for.

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